

Visitor Studies Group one day conference and AGM 4 February 2011, Museum of London

The theme for this year's conference was Audience Research in the Age of Austerity: Ensuring continued support for the visitor voice. These notes are summaries of the presentations from the day. Power point presentations for the presentations summarised here will be on the VSG website.

Visitor studies in Ages of Anxiety. Alan Friedman.

The keynote address was given by Dr Alan Friedman, Former Executive Director of the New York Hall of Science, and now a consultant supporting international museum development and science communication. <http://www.friedmanconsults.com/>

Dr Friedman drew on his extensive experience of advocating for the visitor's voice in his work with funding organisations, those that are funded by them, and government and policy-making agencies. As former President of the Visitor Studies Association (the VSG's sister organisation in the United States), Dr Friedman was well-placed to help delegates focus on what really counts, and we're not just talking visitor numbers here.

Alan picked out three key groups that we need to focus on, and was clear that we need different approaches for each of them:

Funders

In times of austerity they want to hear that what we can offer is measurable, meaningful impact. If we can make the case that their money will improve on the excellent work we do, more money will follow. Funders after all want to be associated with projects that work and want to be able to brag about projects that succeed. They're trying to get smarter, and are very competitive with their peers! In tough times they don't want to know that you're taking risks with their money and they definitely don't want to know that you're coming to them for a rescue package to help your organisation survive. It's clear that front end, formative and summative evaluation plays a critical role here in making sure you've done your homework beforehand, you've made sure you're on target as you go along, and that you can prove you've been a success afterwards and learnt from the experience.

Directors, senior curators, board members

These are the people that have the power to distribute the money funders give them. They want to maximise the output of projects. The challenge here is to make sure this group knows the benefits of committing a percentage of the project budget to audience research, rather than taking that percentage to build a bigger exhibition with more objects. In Alan's experience he's seen these leaders worry about where the next funding is coming from, and if you've nurtured the funders in the bad times, you're more likely to be on their radar next time around. After all there's less money around and ironically less applications being made, so those that do stay in touch, even if they're turned down, they will be remembered. The weight of evidence for the benefits of learning outside the classroom is one of the key messages this group can focus on.

Exhibit designers, educators, curators and media producers – or 'line staff' as he called them

Line staff are the people that are responsible for delivering the projects, and are often the hardest ones to convince. Money for audience research comes directly out of their budgets so it's crucial we make a robust case for its inclusion. At this level it gets professionally personal – 'what if people don't like it?!' Alan recommended that it's vital line staff are

actively involved in the process of audience research. If you're employing an outside agency to do this work, let line staff be involved in choosing which ones you use. They really need to see how evaluation is going to help so let them develop the brief with the evaluator. By making the research and their outcomes useful to each member of staff they'll be more likely to see the relevance. There is no substitute for getting staff to see visitors try to work an interactive that they'd spent months developing, certain in the knowledge that it was idiot proof! Later in the day Jean Franczyk talked about our assumptions; the first being that we need to know 'we are not like our visitors'. I think this was the group of people she was referring to! So getting line staff involved throughout the front end, formative and certainly summative stages of the project is vital. Let them disagree with the recommendations but if you get them involved in writing the final report, they're more likely to own it.

A theme picked up by several of the speakers was that it's OK not to evaluate everything. All everyone wants to know is what works, why, and for whom. Focusing on the positives helps everyone stay focused, engaged and committed.

As we began to discuss measuring impacts, Alan left us with the following thought. His research had shown that learning from inspirational people, especially close family members had the most impact in engaging people in science. The second most inspirational intervention cited was access to a particular book, or a museum, or something outside of the classroom experience. The third was being able to play with a science-based toy as a child – something they could work out for themselves, and have fun with.

Talking of toys (for young ones as well as us ... well let's say 'more mature' folk) do read Alan's essay "Museums in an Age of Anxiety," *The Informal Learning Review*, No. 104 (2010). <http://www.friedmanconsults.com/publications> It contains some remarkable and moving stories that remind us of the value of museums, their ability to connect peoples through time, and the dedication of those that make them happen and keep them going.

Audiences: Knowing them, loving them. David Fleming. Director – National Museums Liverpool.

Our next speaker was David Fleming, Director of National Museums Liverpool (NML). David is passionate about his visitors and encouraged us all to know them, to love them and to really want to cater for them. Having spent his museum career working in cities with high levels of deprivation, and where tourist numbers are low, he has a keen interest in understanding his local audiences.

David gave us our one and only acronym of the day "RCMA":

Research: understanding our audiences

Context: be it our collections, our site, or our audiences

Mission: where should this come from?

Activity and action: that are about culture, attitudes, structures, programmes, promotion, advocacy, education and resources.

David gave a typically motivating and thought-provoking discussion, this time on the kinds of audience research he and his team use so they are better able to understand their audiences and their needs. One of their resources is the Centre for Cities <http://www.centreforcities.org/> This offers a huge amount of data that he considers invaluable in helping them gain a deeper understanding of the circumstances in which their audiences live. Access to free research data

is a theme picked up by Adam Cooper from DCMS later in the day. By looking at this and other research, and by carrying out surveys four times a year at each of their seven museums, David and his staff are able to find out who their local audiences are, what their particular local economic circumstances are, what local government cuts they are currently subject to, what newspapers they read, which of their museums they visit, what motivates them to come, and so on. This means NML understands how what they do fits within the broader context of their audiences' daily lives.

One of David's key drivers is developing audience numbers and because he has such a wealth of research to draw on, he is able to target his response for maximum impact. David's commitment to free entry and his fiercely held belief in social justice are the foundation blocks from which he and his team have been able to more than treble the number of visitors coming to NML over the last ten years. Our own mission, he implores, must arise from our audiences.

Bursary feedback. Caroline Thalund and Emily Dawson.

Caroline and Emily gave brief presentation about the projects they used their bursary awards for and advertised the new name of the bursary (The Alison James Professional Development Bursary) and that the bursary will be doubled for 2011 to £1000.00.

AGM

Full notes from the AGM can be found on the VSG website.

Making audience research add up: The value of CASE. Adam Cooper, Head of Research, DCMS.

Adam presented a collaborative project that DCMS have worked on combining research and research budgets across culture, sports and media; CASE. He noted that DCMS do not carry out visitor studies, but suggested that their research on engagement is a resource that is free to use, and can tailored down from a national to a regional level. His suggestion seemed to mirror quite closely the description David had given of his use of government statistics to mine background data on the potential audiences for his museums. The CASE data can be found at http://www.culture.gov.uk/what_we_do/research_and_statistics/5698.aspx, and can be downloaded in various formats. Adam suggested that there were three points of particular interest in the CASE project for visitor studies professionals.

- 1) The drivers, impacts and value research report
- 2) The local and regional insights datasets
- 3) The CASE database

These are all available for download from the http://www.culture.gov.uk/what_we_do/research_and_statistics/5698.aspx. Adam also suggested that no one spend less than £20K on any visitor research project, and highlighted the ways in which poor research was at best unclear and at worst clear but mistaken. He noted this was one a particular kind of false economy, since going the wrong way with a project could result in far greater problems which could have been managed or avoided from the beginning of a project had research been better carried out.

From a dream to reality: Engaging audiences at the Havering Museum. Liz Neathy, Curator, and Ellen Owen, Front of House Team Leader.

Liz and Ellen each gave a brief presentation on the history and development of Havering Museum (Liz) and current plans to develop audiences through targeted programmes based on

visitor research (Ellen). Havering Museum opened recently after decades of effort from local volunteers and operates today with a large volunteer base. Their tale was one of hope for museums in a recession. They told us about their plans for development and how they managed these developments in the face of limited funding, but none the less managed to develop and expand. Their presentation linked the previously fairly theoretical, strategic and at times abstract discussion to real examples of visitor development.

Moving beyond expert assumptions: How audience research and advocacy changed our approach to climate science. Jean Franczyk, Director of Learning, Science Museum.

Jean began with the following question: Do we care enough about our visitors to talk to them and ask them what they think about an exhibit we're making for them? Like Liz and Ellen before her, Jean talked about how visitor studies had informed the development of a specific exhibition at the Science Museum, highlighting where visitor research had provided the tools to make key decisions about the direction the exhibition was going in, its name, content and the rationale behind it. She emphasised that museum professionals and visitor researchers are actually not like the people who visit the institutions we work for. As a result visitor research can fundamentally change the way we conceptualise and develop exhibitions for the better, which linked back to some of the themes raised by Alan and Adam, that we don't already know the answers, therefore, we do need to carry out visitor research. Jean described how visitor research affected the development of the new climate science gallery at the Science Museum, and Marie, one of the visitor researchers who worked on the project was in the audience and also answered questions from delegates about the research methods used and their impact on the exhibition.

Jean pointed out that at the Science Museum, their rule of thumb is that in projects of £1 million, about 3% of that budget is spent on visitor research. She echoed Alan in describing the benefits of protecting visitor studies budgets. She argued that funders need to know that their money has been well spent, and that visitor studies can demonstrate this, as well as point towards how funding might be used in future projects. She argued that visitor research helped the museum to take calculated risks when developing new ideas and that thirdly, by working with visitor researchers all museum employees were involved in a constant cycle of professional development which over time teaches them to appreciate the problems with projects and constantly develop their work. She argued that carrying out visitor research is the only way to achieve the quality objects set for a project.

Panel discussion

To round off the day delegates engaged the panel, joined by Dr Tiffany Jenkins, Arts and Society Director at the Institute of Ideas, in a discussion on some of the key themes: Defining impacts, arts versus science, qualitative versus quantitative, and the merits of dioramas for displaying aeroplanes!

Tiffany was interested in the value of arts in contemporary society, and how their intrinsic value appears to be lost from the current trends in measuring social and particularly economic impact. She cautioned all organisations about being circumspect in how they present their findings; that visitor studies ought not be used simply as a way to legitimate institutions, but to explore new ideas and unknowns as well. Alan was impressed with the amount and quality of activity in the UK and is keen to continue the dialogue so we can all learn from each other – surely a way forward in these austere times. David reinforced his belief that, in order for us to be able to respond to current levels of public funding, we cannot possibly understand what we are to do tomorrow, if we don't understand what are audiences need. Caroline noted the

balance that we needed to strike between using in house and external evaluators, and how organisations could particularly benefit from volunteers. The Havering Museum's experience here was inspirational. We had an interesting debate around the value of art museums and galleries versus scientific ones. Art museums and galleries were generally known to be good for you, said Jean, largely because of the social history drivers of developing society's sense of well-being that lay behind their establishment. Science museums on the other hand often had to prove there were "learning" outcomes in order to demonstrate their impact and therefore relevance, since they were not seen as a core part of culture. It was interesting to learn that in the USA, very little audience evaluation goes on in art institutions, whereas it is embedded in almost every other category of museum, and especially science-based ones. Were scientists hard-wired to want to define the 'truth' about their visitors? In the world of the arts and social history, there are no right or wrongs, it's all a matter of interpretation! The specificity of the word 'evidence' was noted! On that note, we were all reminded that visitor studies was all about recognising the visitor and not the data.

The presentations, questions and chats over cups of tea demonstrated the valuable role of visitor studies in the field of cultural and heritage organisations. However, it was interesting to note that people struggled to articulate the value of visitor research without implicating the financial benefits to organisations that use visitor studies. Many participants, for example, noted that visitor research could benefit from more collaborative working and sharing of results, which still does not happen as much as might be ideal. Others highlighted that one-off pieces of visitor research might be more insightful if they could be linked to other pieces of research, and suggested that visitor research could benefit from shared methods and practices as well as shared results.

All these comments clearly demonstrated the need for the VSG and the very particular membership we serve that no one else does: cultural and natural heritage organisations. It was a great conference, warmly received by delegates and we look forward to an exciting year ahead for the VSG and for our members.