

Seminar: Audience Advocacy: A Visitor-Centred Approach

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Over the last ten years, the Science Museum has used Audience Advocates on its exhibition, events and website projects. This has been to ensure that the needs, wants and expectations of its audiences are taken into account at all stages of a project and that the end product is one that is engaging and accessible to those visitors it was developed for. This seminar discussed the role of the Audience Advocate as trainer and advisor to the Museum's teams, the affect Advocates have had on projects and practical ways to make Museum staff more audience focused.

The Science Museum

The Science Museum has adopted a visitor led approach over the last few years. The audience advocacy model was developed on exhibitions but is now used on all cultural projects.

The overall aim of visitor research is to help the museum develop exhibitions, web-resources, events that are educational, enjoyable and accessible for their intended audience. This is done through a better understanding of the needs and wants of visitors.

Why have a visitor-centred approach?

There are numerous examples from within the museum to demonstrate examples of insensitivity to the needs and wants of the visitors and the challenges that the museum is facing to overcome this style of relating to their visitors.

The visitor-centred approach was developed for the Wellcome Wing (WW) which opened in 2000, and has been written about by Jo Graham and Ben Gammon in *Communicating Science, Contexts and Channels**.

There has been an increasing recognition within the museum of the needs of visitors. The work on the Wellcome Wing (WW) recognised that a key way to be more sensitive to the needs of the visitors was to introduce the role of Audience Advocate. This role now exists on all major projects including exhibitions, events and websites. It is generally financed by ring fencing 3% of the funding bids for evaluation. Sponsors tend to be very favourable of this approach.



Audience Advocate Roles

The Audience Advocate has a number of different roles within a team. They work alongside the team, but independently. They act as:

- Advisors
- Assessors
- Communicators between the different stakeholders
- Strategists
- Trainers

So what do advocates do?

- Help teams define target audiences, content objectives, learning outcomes and to formalise the whole process.
- Train teams in visitor awareness
- Conduct front-end, formative and summative evaluation.
- Ensure things get changed in response to the evaluation.

How is this done?

The Audience Advocate (AA) is attached to the team throughout. They attend all key meetings and brain-stormings and are available at all times for advice. But they are *not* responsible for delivering any exhibits, resources etc.

The key is that they work alongside but independently the rest of the team.

Case study: who am I?

Alex used this gallery as an example of good practice. It is in the new Wellcome Wing and is very successful despite the fact that it is tackling very complex and scientific issues.

The AA role worked very well here, having a positive effect on the final product.

Specifically the Advocate worked as a *trainer* to the team to help them remember what it is like to be a visitor! This included accompanied visits around the Science Museum, writing up and reported back on their experiences of visiting the gallery; undertaking observation exercises which involved noting down how long visitors spent at various places and what they discussed; undertaking 'horrible visits' which involved visiting somewhere that they wouldn't choose to; assisting with data collection; and attending focus groups.

One of the target audiences for the gallery was families with children aged between 7 and 14 but many of the exhibition team didn't have children so these exercises offered them great insights. It offered a powerful learning experience and was a very effective method for getting the team to understand what was important to the visitor.

The AA also worked with the team to *define the target audience*, which is becoming an increasingly acceptable thing to do. It is particularly important because the museum tends to find that each team member will have a different idea of who the exhibition is for (usually someone like them). This has to be done before anything else because at this point the AA can put to the team the implications of what this target audience might be. For example an initial target audience for the Welcome Wing was teenagers but the work of the AA helped to appreciate both what a relatively small group this was but also how designing for them would have negative implications for other target groups. Also the WW was

planned to attract new audiences and the initial focus groups with non-visitors helped to demonstrate that this wasn't going to be successful.

At the stage when the team are *developing the context*, the AA then works with the team to clarify objectives and to develop a hierarchy of messages. This document is essential throughout the process and teams find they go back to them time and time again. It works to clarify the team's thinking both internally and with outside partners like sponsors and designers, to establish priority of content and to insure omissions are avoided.

Specific examples of the content objectives for *who am I?* were:
Level 1 messages that 'science is challenging the way we define our identity: our physical attributes, behaviour, feelings, origins and human nature'. Level 2 messages then worked throughout the gallery, whilst level 3 messages were in specific area and level 4 messages were much more specific such as 'sex hormones control gender changes in development and throughout life'. Ultimately there were six levels.

Having got this framework, the AA's role is then to discuss with the team how this will be put across and to ensure that *learning will occur*. In this case the AA got the team to broaden out from quite a narrow definition of learning (purely cognitive learning) to consider learning in a broader sense (affective learning, social learning, learning of physical and mental skills, and personal learning).

The AA is also responsible for the *evaluation*. This includes front-end evaluation that involves desk research looking at what is already known using previous evaluations of projects, academic research and government white papers. This stage is also about establishing what the gaps are in the team's knowledge in terms of what they don't know about the target audience.

This does not mean that the audience set the content, which some people at the Science Museum can get concerned about. It does mean working out how to make the content relevant, interesting and accessible to the target audience.

The focus groups from this case study that were discussing genetics and brain science said things like:

'Highbrow'

'Unappealing'

'To make it interesting they've got a problem on their hands'

'What objects are there going to be to interact with?'

The solution was to address how to tackle this. The exhibition needed an organising theme to add appeal to something that was intrinsically dull and enable the messages to be put across. The answer was to base it in personal identity hence *who am I?*

Formative evaluation

There is then extensive testing of the interactives looking at:

- Ergonomics: can visitors effectively operate the exhibit?
- Comprehension: can visitors understand the content?
- Motivation: does the activity attract and hold attention?

At this point the AA writes a short, pithy, practical report with recommendations, based on the evidence. This is fed back directly to team and can then be fed back to designers. This helps to depersonalise what can be difficult and contributes creative solutions to the problems that have been identified.

The final stage of testing is the *summative evaluation*, ensuring that the original objectives have been met and target audiences have been reached. The key question to answer is whether the exhibition successful? And what lessons can we learn for the future?

Common arguments that crop up when doing evaluation:

'I've been doing this for years I know what to do'

'You are stifling my creativity'

It is important here to remember that the AA is identifying barriers and providing visitor research acts that can act as a catalyst for creativity. Not everything will be right first time, risks can be taken, there is time to develop the exhibits and things can be learnt from past successes and mistakes.

'Audience-led is just dumbing down'

It's not about dumbing down but about matching the level of the content to the audience.

Sometimes it's necessary to ask the team to *increase* the level of their content by integrating it into the interactive rather than putting it on the label.

'We don't have time or money to do visitor research'

There are ways of doing this cheaply, such as putting it into the funding bid. The savings from the evaluations are high because Science Museum is really beginning to understand what visitors want and how they learn. Interactives are effective because time has been spent establishing ergonomic and motivational barriers to their use.

The visitor research at the Science Museum costs approx. £110,000 per annum, which can be thought of as equal to three computer interactive exhibits! Over the last ten years over 100 such exhibits have been saved from failure, which is approximately equal to £3 million of exhibits.

- *Communicating Science, Contexts and Channels* p 94-109 (Routledge) edited by E. Scanlon, E. Whitelegg, S.Yates; (1999)

Questions:

How do you break down your audiences into more manageable groups?

The museum talks in terms of independent adults (without children), families and school groups. The school groups are broken down by curriculum stage (key stage 1, 2, 3, 4, higher education) and families can be broken down in the same way. Independent adults break down into pre-nester and post-nester. The museum also talks in terms of specialists and non-specialists e.g. scientists and non-scientists for the WW.

Could you say more about recruiting advocates?

Recent projects have been advertised, internally initially and then externally, with clearly specified qualities (e.g. diplomatic, independent). Recent advocates in the museum have all had a background as 'explainers', which has given them a head start on understanding the audiences and knowing how to approach them. Also the museum has a placement system in the visitor research department offering one-month placements to those studying museum studies courses.

How have you overcome resistance?

Two of the initial advocates at the museum are now very senior in the organisation, which has made a difference. There is also increasing recognition from teams that the final galleries are more successful because of the AA being on board. Junior advocates tend to be mentored by more senior members of staff. Teams are also well briefed on the outset at how the process will work and what to expect from the AA.