The Visitor Studies Group Annual Conference
London, 16 and 17 March 2016

This is a summary of the conference, with a particular focus on points relevant to small and medium-sized museums.

By Christina Lister, marketing consultant.

About the Visitor Studies Group

The Visitor Studies Group is a membership organisation for individuals whose role involves, uses or benefits from visitor studies, and it aims to champion visitor studies as a force for evidence-based decision-making to encourage and create excellent visitor experiences for all audiences.

The conference

The overall theme of the conference was "It's what you do with it" and the aim was to explore:

- How can visitor studies have real impact?
- How can research and evaluation findings be communicated internally and externally?
- How does visitor research influence decisions and contribute to effective change?
- How can we raise awareness of visitor studies and ensure it has the profile it so rightly deserves?

Summary

The two-day conference was full of interesting and thought-provoking sessions. It struck me that what all presentations had in common was an emphasis on the importance of good communication, whether communicating research results, using research for advocacy or to impact change. Having a clear point or narrative and presenting this in a digestible way that is appropriate to the recipient is key to ensuring visitor studies have impact.

Presentation overviews

Keynote: Lamia Dabboussy, Head of Audience Planning and Brand Insight, BBC

Lamia's presentation shared how the BBC works to understand its audiences and how insight is used to help shape programming and strategy. Whilst on the surface there may not be so many parallels between the vast BBC and museums in our region, there were many insights which are relevant:

- "Culture eats strategy for breakfast" – you need to understand and work within the culture of your organisation
- You can't keep doing what you've always been doing – the landscape, people, habits and behaviour are changing, so you need to adapt
- "Data and numbers on their own don't answer many questions" – you also need *insight*
- "You can't fly blind anymore" – Lamia meets less resistance to her planning and research function than a few years ago, as colleagues realise the importance of audience data and insights
- Key elements the BBC measures are:
    - Reach

- o Quality
- o Value
- o Impact

And it strikes me that these are universally useful markers.

A lovely takeaway from this presentation was learning that the BBC's six Values are on the back of every staff member's security pass and that number 2 is "Audiences are at the heart of everything we do."

Overcoming the challenges visitor research faces in large institutions
Jane Rayner (Science Museum) and Emma Morioka (Historic Royal Palaces)

In this session, Jane and Emma explained their approach to visitor research at their organisations. Jane talked about how the Science Museum now has Audience Advocates embedded into all large-scale projects and that they run audience awareness training across their teams.

Emma – who has the great job title of "Audience Champion" – shared how they have developed a series of "golden questions" that they ask of visitors every time they do visitor research, which can be supplemented by additional questions; templates for ease and consistency; and then bringing in external support when additional expertise is needed. Crucially, they have moved from considering evaluation at the end of projects, to something that is considered in planning and all the way through. They use infographics, films and voxpops to report back and for advocacy. Interestingly, their Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) mirrored those of the BBC: reach, quality, learning value and value.

Unlock the story: Caroline Florence from Insight Narrator

Caroline explored how storytelling can help to make a better connection between your data and your recipients to inspire action. She offered a response to a quote from Herbert Simon, a Nobel Prize-winning Economist:

> "Information consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention."

There is a clear issue with many reports which are too long with too much information. Caroline showed how story-telling can bring to life your visitor data, without losing its research vigour, thereby inspiring people to read.

At the heart of good stories lie four factors which can be applied to communication of visitor research:

1. **Conflict**: this can be used to provoke and add interest. For example the difference between "The cat sat on the mat" (an observation) and "The cat sat on the other cat's mat" (a story with intrigue).
2. **Consistency**: repetition, whether it's within a story, across projects or within a team
3. **Colour**: add nuance, as people are complicated and sensory beings
4. **Connection**: even rational messages need to be connected in an emotional way.

Caroline showed a short animated film featuring a hypothetical couple and their journey from the age of 60 onwards, navigating their way through significant events and their contact with different services. It was created as part of the Young Foundation's Ageing Well Innovation Series with an aim of stimulating new and more holistic ways of thinking about older people and their experience of services, amongst local government and partners. The result was arguably a much more powerful and emotive way of communicating than a lengthy report, and worth a watch to understand Caroline's points and for inspiration: http://youngfoundation.org/publications/charlie-and-marie-a-tale-of-ageing/.

Small post-it notes, Big Ideas
Andrew McIntyre (Director, Morris Hargreaves McIntyre)

Andrew followed on with this theme, talking about so much data, so little insight, or "analysis paralysis".

He shared that his team do not start writing reports until they have finished with their thinking; rather they assemble reports at the end to illustrate their thinking.

Andrew explained the idea of identifying your *main* point or argument: if you only have one Post-It Note to write it on – what would it be? This struck me as a good discipline in helping to clarify your thinking and then being very clear in your communication. If you develop this idea, you can come up with several Post-It Notes, each of which becomes the basis for a chapter heading, and the executive summary of the report.

Perhaps the funniest takeaway from the conference was Andrew's point to "Be like Rupert the Bear"! By this he meant use the cartoon's format of having a heading, picture and caption, followed by more additional layers and detail, as a good mechanism for reporting on your findings.

Are visitor studies professional enough?
Marie Hobson (Research Manager, Heritage Lottery Fund)

This session started with a short provocation about the need to professionalise visitor studies from Marie, and was followed by questions and comments from the floor. There were many different views, from advocating for the need to standardise approaches and training, to the issue of whether the name "visitor studies" is appropriate, to the wish to avoid duplication or competition with the Market Research Society (www.mrs.org.uk).

Keynote: Esme Ward, Head of Engagement, Manchester Museum and Whitworth Art Gallery, The University of Manchester

Esme shared the journey of the recent £15 million development which has transformed the gallery, and how consulting above and beyond its walls impacted on programming and informed developments.

In particular, Esme talked about the success of outreach and community work they undertook during the development, leading her to coin the phrase that they were "never more open than when closed". This ranged from placing valuable work in Selfridges' entrance to DIY art programmes for families at ASDA to a poet in a pub.

A couple of key takeaways for me are:

- staff were given one day a week to embed themselves within other organisations, as a learning and listening exercise. For example one volunteered in a Forest School in an early years centre, one ran a coffee morning in a residential care home. This seems like a great, transferable idea, in which museum staff can really get to know their audiences and communities
- Esme also echoed an earlier point that "the work is never finished" as communities change
- a point about the importance of *listening* versus "ta-da" – staff don't always know best

The team have produced a couple of publications which could be useful reading:

- "A handbook for cultural engagement for older men" – http://documents.manchester.ac.uk/display.aspx?DocID=24251
- "How museums and galleries can enhance health and wellbeing" – www.healthandculture.org.uk/publications/issuu-test-post/ .

Data visualisation
Adam Frost and Tobias Sturt (Graphic digital agency)

This session showcased how to transform data into stories and visuals that get people interested in data. Their focus was on *visual* storytelling, for example infographics, animations, interactives.

They emphasised that all design choices need to be driven by data and that visuals firstly need to persuade people to look – draw them in, and that then people should be rewarded with clear content they can understand and engage with.

Adam and Tobias illustrated their points with some examples:

- David McCandless: When sea levels attack: www.informationisbeautiful.net/visualizations/when-sea-levels-attack-2/
- Kai Krause: The true size of Africa: http://kai.sub.blue/en/africa.html
- Bloomberg's billionaires as an example of an interactive: www.bloomberg.com/billionaires/2016-03-21/cya, showing how you can let people make their own choices about what information they want to see and increasing the likelihood of them getting emotionally involved.

Key free tools they recommended included:

- http://infogr.am/, http://visual.ly/, www.piktochart.com, www.visage.co/ – tools to create infographics
- www.datavizcatalogue.com – helps you find the right data visualisation method (chart)
- https://inkscape.org/ – a free and open-source vector graphics editor which can be used to create or edit vector graphics such as illustrations, diagrams, line arts, charts, logos and complex paintings
- https://color.adobe.com/ – to help you find choose colour themes
- www.google.com/fonts – free open-source fonts optimised for the web
- http://thenounproject.com – free and low-cost icons

For many more of their recommendations for tools, examples and further reading see their list here: https://goog.gl/dsG9bj.

Ensuring Visitor Studies has a voice
Panellists: Anette Loeseke (New York University Berlin), Matt Sheard (Museum of the University of St Andrews), Andy Moss (Chester Zoo)

This was panel discussion about barriers experienced by those working in visitor studies. The speakers discussed what barriers there are, including: colleagues being sceptical, fearful, uninterested, time-poor; research not supporting pre-conceived ideas; a lack of understanding and knowledge about the field; and the misuse of data.

Solutions were mainly focussed on communication: for those who work within visitor studies to communicate: the importance of their work, succinctly and in a way that can be understood by its audiences; their methodology, what it means and why it is robust; the purpose of the research; and communicate diplomatically. Another suggestion was also about including more training in visitor studies for the next generation of museum professionals.

Keeping it simple
Lindsey Green (Partner, Frankly, Green + Webb)

Lindsey shared details of her work on a large-scale digital interpretation project with the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. She echoed earlier speaker's points about how work is a constant learning process as the audience and technology keep changing.

She emphasised the importance of identifying and defining the focus on the design activity – the "manifesto" which she described as "a public declaration of intentions, opinions, objectives, or motives." This list will then guide the development of the project. Example statements Lindsey gave from their list were: the guide will be easy to use in every context; it will help visitors look carefully at the real art; it will ease congestion and help visitors to get closed to the paintings.

Not only will the manifesto be a very useful guide to keep referring to throughout the development of the project, but it also formed the framework for the evaluation. A very transferable idea.

Double Vision: Museums Making the most of shared data
Margot Walker & Katie Cudworth (Audience Agency), Christina Lister & Amanda Burke (Independent Consultants)

These two presentations explored tools used by small to medium sized museums and how collaborating to collect data can affect greater impact.

Amanda and I presented the Visitor Insight East programme which we ran on behalf of SHARE Museums East in 2014, a one-year programme of visitor research and audience development in which 13 museums across the region took part. The summary can be viewed on SHARE's website under Reaching Audiences Resources.

The Audience Agency presented Visitor Finder, a national audience data collection and development tool they deliver: www.theaudienceagency.org/insight/insight-into-museum-visitor.

Both presentations highlighted the significant benefits of sharing data, and thereby being able to benchmark and compare your museum's findings with others.

It's what you do with it

The final session was a facilitated discussion looking at how visitor studies can have real impact. Key points included:

- ensuring those with responsibility for visitor studies have a seat at the table
- having a "killer stat" (statistic)
- pulling heartstrings with video
- picking your battles
- keeping yourself out of the picture until you are relevant to the story
- the importance of communication – observing, talking and listening

Membership and bursary

All presentations can be viewed here: http://visitors.org.uk/visitor-studies-its-what-you-do-with-it-london-march-2016/. To learn more about the Visitor Studies Group and their bursary visit: http://visitors.org.uk/.

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