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Planning for Interactive Interpretation: Choosing the Right Media for your Organization, Story, and Audience

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Abstract

Reconciling message, media, and experience is key to the success of any interpretive endeavor. While message must inform media selection, a variety of other factors serve to broaden and limit the palette of media choices, among them mission, staff, budget, resources, and infrastructure. Further, audience must be considered in making media choices. One method of conceptualizing the universe of nonpersonal interactive media is to divide into broad categories: environments, objects, signs, publications, mechanical interactives, generative experiences, audio, video/film, electronic interactives, computer interactives, and virtual experiences. Each media type has advantages and disadvantages and these trade-offs must be considered as part of the media selection process, as is illustrated by a recent interpretive project for a historic site.

Introduction

Reconciling message, media, and experience is key to the success of any interpretive endeavor, yet sometimes little consideration is given to the array of media options available for the average interpretive project. By making considered and deliberate media choices and planning accordingly, the visitor experience can be greatly enhanced and the desired message can be more effectively delivered.

The Media and the Message - Means and Ends

In order to choose the right the media for your organization, audience, and story, it is essential to understand that first and foremost, media is a means, not an end. The interpretive landscape is littered with a variety of exhibit elements, interactives, and programs that are gratuitous, superfluous, incongruous, and sometimes just strange. In order for the media to contribute to the communication of the desired message, rather than distract from it, we must ask "What is our message and how does this media further it?"

Deliberate Choices and Planning

Answering this question is critical. If we accept that interpretation is a communication process by which our missions are made manifest, then we must place message first in our consideration of our media choices. Mission and message must inform media.

As primary as mission and message are, there are other considerations that must be weighed. Some media may be more effective at reaching certain audiences than others. Not all visitors learn from the same type of media. Audience expectations may need to be taken into consideration in making media choices. In addition, some media require more resources, staff, infrastructure, maintenance, and training than others. Further, one must be mindful that the media itself may convey a meaning quite separate from the content.

Brief Analysis of Nonpersonal Media

Although not an exhaustive list, the analysis offers many possible media choices for interpretive projects. The list is categorized from least technical to increasingly more technical media.

Environment

Whether you are conscious of it or not, your visitors are immersed in an environment which often conveys the first and most powerful interpretive message of the visitor experience. Consequently, that environment should be deliberately designed to support, or at least not hinder, the communication of the desired message.

Positives:

- Makes a powerful statement without resorting to explicit means
- Provides supportive infrastructure to other interpretive media
- Engages multiple senses

Negatives:

- Can be expensive
- Many factors can be beyond institutional control

Objects

While objects cannot speak for themselves, they do carry meaning and, indeed, can carry many meanings.

Positives:

- Provides supportive infrastructure to other interpretive media
- Can provide an experience with the authentic
- Can carry a variety of meanings

Negatives:

- Can be expensive
- Can carry a variety of meanings

Signs

Interpretive signs are the “foot soldiers” of most interpretive efforts.

Positives:

- Generally cost-effective
- Provides consistent interpretive message
- Can be used at visitors' own pace

Negatives:

- Relatively inflexible
- Appeals to limited learning styles
- Can impinge on the desired environment

Publications

Brochures, maps, scavenger hunts, and a variety of printed materials can serve interpretive purposes.

Positives:

- Generally self-explanatory
- Generally portable
- Requires comparatively little space in comparison to information contained

Negatives:

- A potential require frequent updating
- Appeals to limited learning styles
- Requires distribution system

Mechanical Interactives

Mechanical or hands-on interactives have long been staples in the interpretive repertoire of informal education venues. These include elements such as flip books, lift-and-drop doors, sliding doors, and much more.

Positives:

- Provides source of participation
- Can provide a sense of discovery
- Appeals to active learners

Negatives:

- Maintenance
- Can impinge on the desired environment
- Message can get lost in the activity

Generative Art

Generative art makes visitors into participants by allowing them to express their ideas through a variety of media, such as art and writing.

Positives:

- Source of participation
- Sense of discovery
- Appeals to active and visual learners

Negatives:

- Editorial process may limit free expression
- Institutional message can get lost
- Often space and staff intensive

Audio

Sound can be delivered in many ways including audio tours and soundscapes.

Positives:

- Appeals to auditory learners
- Can help contextualize a place
- Can provide a means to reach multiple audience groups

Negatives:

- Difficult for hearing-impaired visitors
- Maintenance
- Can be a source of sound pollution

Video/Film

Video can be delivered by podcasts, kiosks, mini-theaters, and larger theater experiences.

Positives:

- Appeals to visual and auditory learners
- Ability to compress time and space
- Can show motion

Negatives:

- Expensive to produce
- Can require seating and dedicated space
- Maintenance

Electronic Interactives

Electronic interactives are largely "push-button" interactives, powered by electricity.

Positives:

- Source of participation
- Sense of discovery
- Appeals to active learners

Negatives:

- Maintenance
- Can impinge on the desired environment
- Requires power source

Computer Interactives

Computer interactives require a computer to function, which distinguishes them from mechanical or electrical interactives. Examples include kiosks, touch screens, and multi-touch screens.

Positives:

- Updatable content
- Provides source of participation
- Large multi-touch installations for multiple users can foster dialog

Negatives:

- Expensive to produce
- Maintenance
- Can impinge on the desired environment

Virtual Interactives

Virtual interactives are experiences that take place in a virtual world, often via the internet.

Positives:

- Dialogue can continue well after the initial experience
- Can reach a larger audience than just those that come to your site
- Source of participation

Negatives:

- Divorced from place
- Requires significant investment of staff resources
- Raises questions of institutional authority and "correct" message

Conclusion

The key to successful use of interpretive media is to clearly identify your message and your audience before you choose your media. Remember media is a means, not an end. Deliberately planning for media can enhance the visitor experience, provide multiple avenues for conveying your message, and ultimately cause the visitors to return with others to share the experience again.