

Enhancement of the International Visitor Experience to London Museums and Galleries

Research Findings

Context: cultural tourism, cultural diplomacy, and the globalisation of commerce, communications, ideas

The research shows that London museums and galleries are already aware of the need to develop their international visitor numbers in an increasingly competitive global market, and this is evident in their published visitor/audience reports, mission statements, annual reports and in some of the information available for international visitors. International visitor numbers are monitored as part of wider audience research, often carried out through the use of market research companies (MORI and BDRG are mentioned by Tate).

Such audience research findings reveal interesting differences to which we should also be sensitive in the bid to provide culturally-informed and specifically targeted information. For example there are differences between Tate Britain and Tate Modern in terms of the age, gender and provenance of visitors, and in the types of visitors attracted to certain institutions. Audience research by the Victoria and Albert Museum shows a significantly higher number of international creative industry professionals visiting the museum in 2004/05 compared to groups. Tate appears to be particularly aware of visitor experience, describing itself in its 2005 annual report as “one of the more visitor-focused museums in the sector” (indicating therefore that it considers other less visitor-focused) and “aware that visitors need to be placed at the heart of organisational development”. After carrying out a major visitor audit in 2003, it set up a Visitor Experience Development Group, and develops strategies relating to service standards and income generation. The V&A sees itself as having as playing a role in cultural diplomacy in what it terms “an active cultural system”, and in its annual report notes particularly the globalisation of ideas and culture as well as of commerce and communications. However, these surveys and polls are all conducted in English and within the museums and galleries. The use of focus groups outside the UK in our research therefore, would provide information that they do not currently have access to and a perspective that has not been explored by the current market research practices that they employ.

The 2005 International Passenger Survey from the Office for National Statistics shows that while visitors from the USA currently (far) outstrip European visitors in spending, the visitor numbers are close – USA then France and Germany, followed by other Europeans: Spanish, Dutch, Italians, Belgians. The Germans, French and Spanish figure at the top of the spend table after the Americans.

The websites of Tate, National Gallery, National Portrait Gallery, the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum are good examples of the recognition by the sector of the need for information to be available in

languages other than English, but this remains very variable. The Russian-speaking visitor to London would find information on Tate, the National Gallery and the V&A, but not the British Museum or the National Portrait Gallery. The Chinese-speaking visitor would not necessarily be presented with the appropriate character system when information in Chinese is available at all. The National Portrait Gallery provides Chinese, but not the National Gallery nor the British Museum (which of the large museums has the worst provision). We need to be aware that some of the museums and galleries clearly see foreign-language information via the website as the direction for future development – Tate currently provides on-line information in German, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Greek, Japanese, Russian, Arabic, Chinese and Polish and the quality and content of this is much better than that provided in print format at Tate Britain, for example. The V&A has recently expanded its provision to eight languages, already achieving the goal set out in last year's annual report to add seven more to Chinese by 2007 (these are Arabic, German, Spanish, French, Italian, Japanese and Russian). The V&A website recorded 10 million visits last year – 60% of which were from overseas (its status amongst creative industry professionals should be remembered here, however).

However, the printed information at the point of contact currently provided for international visitors at London's leading museums and galleries, and the main focus of this research project, is generally at best inadequate, at worst alienating. It is often too basic or too confusing to be of any practical use. When available at all, it is often poorly presented (photocopied sheets) suggesting to the visitor that information in other languages is of less value than that on offer in English. The National Gallery is the exception here with the foreign language information presented in exactly the same format as that available in English, and using a clear system of international symbols to indicate its facilities, a factor criticised in the Tate Britain printed information, which does not use these symbols.

Information takes the form of translations, of variable quality, based on written information that originates in an English cultural perspective showing no awareness of the needs, expectations and sensitivities of visitors from other cultural areas. Research at physical as opposed to virtual museum sites reveals therefore that there is often a mismatch between the aims expressed with regard to international visitors in an institution's statements and its practice. In our survey, the V&A, a museum with a well-developed and linguistically varied website and a clear acknowledgement of the importance of international visitors in its annual reports (as indicated above) had no foreign language information available at the information desk (although it does have in fact have photocopied A4 sheets in a drawer under the reception desk) because: "Marketing doesn't like us to have too many leaflets out". According to this logic, a foreign visitor would need to approach the information desk and ask, in English, if there was any information available in their particular language.

The British Museum should be singled out for the paucity of information on offer. While the website offers some information in French, German, Italian, Spanish and Japanese, there are no printed leaflets and international visitors wishing to navigate the museum in any meaningful way need to bring their own guide books or pay £6 for an in-house guide. The result of this is

clear in the demand for audio guides (another linguistic variable in all museums and galleries) which, observation shows, outstrips supply. Another hit and miss factor is the information which is available for temporary exhibitions. Taking Tate Britain as an example, at the recent Gothic Nightmares Exhibition, printed information (A4 photocopied sheets) was available in Italian, French, Japanese, German and Spanish, but not in Russian and Chinese, although these are available in the general information sheets, resulting in another potentially frustrating visitor experience for speakers of those two languages. Nothing at all was available for an exhibition of recent British art being held at the same time. Perhaps, therefore, consistency of provision as well as quality should be part of the standard to be set.

In the increasingly competitive global tourism environment, and in the light of planning for the 2012 Olympic Games which stresses that Britain should be a 'generous host', aware that it is hosting the Games for the world, and a 'cultural inspiration' (taken from Jacqui Smith's Keynote Address to the Museum Association's 2005 Annual Conference), London's galleries and museums need to re-visit attitudes to the information (and by extension the welcome) that they provide for foreign visitors. While Britain is consistently rated highly in visitor surveys for 'culture', it is almost universally rated poor for welcome according to polls carried out for VisitBritain. The VisitBritain survey shows that the Chinese, for example, believe that they would not be warmly received in Britain, while France comes top of their perception of the most welcoming country which in the light of this developing market requires urgent attention. Of the Europeans surveyed, only the Russians scored Britain highly for the likely welcome that they would receive.

The notion of the 'Entrepreneurial Museum' is one of the themes for the Museums Association Annual Conference to be held in October 2006, and it is clear, again in annual reports and other institutional statements that the sector is looking for ways to generate and increase income. With evidence that the UK visitor economy remains strong and with growth rates of visitors from countries such as China and Eastern Europe increasing (based on VisitBritain research), it is not enough to rely on an unsatisfactory mixture of often poor quality foreign language material and assumptions that international visitors will largely be able to cope with English.

Theoretical Underpinning:

The research shows that while museum professionals consider academics important in, for example, providing a historical perspective and for reminding them that there is an academic underpinning to what they do, opaque language and 'jargon' should be avoided. It is essential that it is clear to them how the insights will convert into practice/strategy. It is also essential that academics are up-to-date on recent museum literature and thinking.

Since evidence-based policy is clearly the order of the day, the project should capitalise on the fact that the sector is aware that it needs better marketing and PR, that it needs better data, and that it needs to be acting pro-actively in the increasingly competitive global tourism environment. Therefore, while the research and the work on producing culturally-informed information

is partially based on semiotic analysis (that is to say the theory of signs and sign systems and the production and reception of these, including Lotman's notion of the 'semiosphere' in which he foregrounds the notion of translation, and builds on the ideas of Benjamin showing that translation is always to some extent an interpretation, a "supplement" to the original), and on translation theories/intercultural communication (based on, for example, the work of Bassnett and Lefevere), the research should be presented in a way that is immediately applicable and emphasise the field work (focus groups) findings.

Synopsis of the project:

The quality and availability of information for foreign visitors varies enormously. Research carried out at the sites of various galleries and museums around London and feedback from our focus group meetings held in France, Spain, Germany, Russia, the Arab Gulf States (Bahrain) and Hong Kong (with Hong Kong and mainland Chinese and Taiwanese participants) shows that culturally-informed information that meets the cultural and linguistic expectations of foreign visitors would significantly enhance their experience (the detailed information on this is available separately). One way of increasing foreign visitor dwell-time and spend in museums and galleries would be to provide high value, customised information based on positive messages and inter-cultural communication.

The museum and gallery sector uses a wide range of consultants for information on, for example, visitor services, for which there are ten consultants listed by the Museum Association, as opposed to one translation service, indicating a gap for consultancy in this area. The University of Westminster is able to offer the sector a consultancy/advisory role providing high-value, high-quality, customised information for a wide range of international visitors with a view to enhancing the visitor experience.

Suggested format to establish the consultancy:

A round-table discussion to discuss further the expectations of international visitors to London's museums and galleries and to exchange ideas on the sector's needs in this area of audience research and development to take place on Wednesday 1st November 2006 at 4pm. This discussion will be followed at 6pm by a Smithsonian-Westminster Evening Public event with Lonnie Bunch, founding Director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture (Washington) in conversation with Mike Phillips, writer, broadcaster, and consultant on Access and Inclusion, Tate Gallery (this is a preliminary event for the Teaching London conference on 3rd and 4th November and the Tudor and Reformation Study Day organised on 11th November in association with Tate Britain's Holbein exhibition).

Heads of Education and Interpretation (titles vary in various museums and galleries) should be invited since this is the area in which we already

have contacts, but we need to target Directors of Development, of Media and Communications, of Marketing, and of Visitor Services (again titles vary). In addition to the major central London museums and galleries on which the research has focused (Tate Britain primarily, but also Tate Modern, British Museum, National Gallery, National Portrait Gallery, V&A), I suggest inviting the Royal Academy, Museum of London, and the Wallace Collection (none of which currently has any information available in languages other than English). The following could also be considered: Barbican Art Gallery; Buckingham Palace Public Relations and Marketing; Courtauld Institute Galleries; Hayward Gallery; British Library; Imperial War Museum; Westminster Abbey Museum; Design Museum; National Maritime Museum; Science Museum; Natural History Museum; National Army Museum; London's Transport Museum. I have contact names for all of the above institutions and departments from research in the Museums and Galleries Yearbook. Invitation to be drafted and sent out in September.

Professor Debra Kelly
Department of Modern Languages
School of Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages
July 2006