

Achievement Pride
Elite/quality Excellence
Fair play Inclusiveness of diversity

This research provided a clear direction for the development of an exhibition brief. The National Museum of Australia won the contract to develop and maintain the exhibition. A few months after opening in 1996 they commissioned Environmetrics to evaluate the effectiveness of the exhibition in meeting its communication aims and to highlight weak areas which needed improvement.

We conducted exit interviews and systematic observation which involved tracking visitors, timing and counting as well as observing for interactions, use and safety.

The overall finding from the evaluation was that the exhibition did an excellent job of meeting the expectations of visitors. The following table presents visitor ratings for Sportex along with other National Museum exhibitions for comparison.

Table 2. Overall rating of Sportex (percentages)

Exhibition	Exc	Good	Avg	Poor
Sportex	74	23	3	-
Rubbery	74	21	5	1
Figures				
Women with	46	33	19	2
Attitude				
Tolerance	15	64	17	4

As well as noting aspects which needed refinement, the research outlined the following principles which underpinned the success of the Sportex exhibition.

The exhibition reflected the values of the institution by celebrating achievement and effort as well as by acknowledging diversity in a high-quality exhibition which was colourful, active, stylish and ingenious in its presentation.

The exhibition met and surpassed the content expectations of the audience by going beyond the high profile stars and well-known facts to surprise and interest with audience with details that were intriguing and sometimes quirky.

The exhibition provided a good mix of 'look and learn' along with 'do and learn' activities to cater for different learning styles.

The exhibition made excellent use of exhibits which were structured for social participation, so that onlookers as well as more active participants were often deeply engaged with activities within the exhibition space.

The evaluation was important in verifying the importance of the mix of exhibits in creating a very successful exhibition which had strong appeal to a very wide general audience.

It is likely that these principles are applicable to a wide range of exhibitions which seek to interest a general audience.

savage@mpx.com.au

Reading the Readers: The Role of Semiotics in Visitor Research

Gillian Fuller

Communications Consultant and Lecturer
University of New South Wales

A visitor walking through an exhibition is bombarded with a multitude of messages delivered through different media. As they walk through the space they infer meanings, both personal and institutional, from the way the objects are displayed, labeled and arranged, from the labels, the lighting, the sound and from the way others are interacting with the displays.

When the exhibition teams assess the effectiveness of an exhibition, they attempt to gauge whether the meanings that visitors take away with them match the communicative goals they had in planning the exhibition. Essential to this evaluative process is a practical and sound understanding of just what communication is. I would like to argue that semiotics, the systematic study of meaning making, can provide another perspective that can further refine the evaluation work performed by more the traditional methodologies of questionnaires, tracking surveys and focus groups.

The semiotic model of communication asserts that messages are not pure products that are transmitted from one person to another, but are joint constructions between Senders and Receivers. That is to say, communication isn't about transmitting the curatorial message to visitors who fail or succeed in understanding curatorial intent, it's about production and exchange of meaning that occurs between museums and their visitors.

How we produce meanings however is socially constrained. We need to understand that the meanings that we make aren't products of our own free will and good intentions but are produced through social and cultural contexts which vary according to who is speaking, writing, organizing space etc and who is being addressed and what meaning structures they are familiar with.

Semiotics focuses on the way in which we understand meanings systematically by their relationships and differences to other meanings. It can do this on a local level by considering relationships within and between texts.

Consider the following example. In a recent temporary exhibition at the Australian Museum about biodiversity called *Kaleidoscope of Life*, a light box carried images of three species of animals that were introduced to Australia by European 'settlers.' The light box was part of a series of images that show environmental degradation to the continent of Australia. These images of rabbits, foxes and buffaloes each had the word 'immigrant' overlaid on the image in the

style of a mock passport stamp. The curatorial intent is clear to anyone familiar with environmentalist discourses. The display is intended to show that these animals are not native to Australia and therefore have upset ecological processes. The text however has other meanings which are more insidious.

In the images described above dominant cultural phobias about migrants are transferred through the use of the passport stamps onto non-indigenous animals that were brought to Australia. The destructiveness of introduced species is given rhetorical force by deploying the threatening image of the invading migrant.

Semiotic techniques which look at relations between texts and within text (whether those texts be written, visual, spatial, etc.) can provide a way of making sense of the varying and sometimes seemingly idiosyncratic responses that visitors have to exhibitions. These techniques are based on systematically studying the modes and form of meaning.

Semiotics is a useful tool for evaluating not only what visitors understand in an exhibition, it provides a framework for understanding why they take away certain meanings. This is not to say that the concepts and methods of semiotics will provide the definitive analysis of the meanings an exhibition has made. Rather, it provides an account of the multiple meanings that any exhibition will invariably produce, thus providing clues not only to how to structure meaning more in concord with curatorial aims but it can also alert exhibition teams to some of the meanings they might be unintentionally producing.

gillianf@ozomail.com.au

Empowerment, Evaluation and Narrative Structures

Judith Gleeson

Communication and Language Studies Dept.
Victoria University of Technology, Melbourne

Evaluation in museums has had a difficult history. Research has in the past been very much determined by museum perceptions and perspectives and it is only recently that the notion that audience and visitor responses should be canvassed has developed. Much earlier interpretation, evaluation and assessment was driven by the idea that audience attitudes should be changed by visits to museums — now evaluation is often concerned with the amount of learning that has taken place. This seems a limited approach.

During the last decades public life and mass culture have become the focus of research due in part to the growing economic importance of popular culture in western-style economies. The postmodern convergence between high

culture and popular culture driven by economic forces and new technology is a phenomenon which causes museums to find that they must appeal to popular, that is mass, audiences in order to justify their existence and cost. With the increasing emphasis on museum visitor evaluation, the field is more able to address questions about what visitors do and how they make meaning of their experiences. So measuring retention of information — a common view of “learning” — does not address the complexity of the visitor’s responses.

Insights from mass media theory to do with audience reception can be used by researchers in the museum sphere. In particular, those which have moved from the notion that the audience is passive, to a concentration on the way in which audiences use offerings in the mass media. Museums and popular culture both mediate reality — therefore theories which deal with audience reception in popular culture can be useful.

Much of the mass media and cultural studies research has grown out of social theory and owes a great deal to Marxism, however there are strands of such research that deal with rhetoric and which grow out of literary theory. One idea in particular which originated in medicine, psychology, and sociology, that of narrative discourse, has some potential to illuminate the museum experience. Theorists such as Mishler (1986) and Tambling (1991), argue that narrative constructions of selfhood which often depend on values clarification are common in everyday life.

Research Process

Letters were solicited through the *Australian Woman’s Weekly* asking people why they visited museums. The *Women’s Weekly* is a monthly magazine with a circulation of over one million and read predominantly by women over 35 years who aren’t in the paid work-force. Thirty-three readers, self-selected, chose to reply to this request and their letters were examined in detail. A substantial block of time was also spent doing participatory observation at various museums, in particular, Sovereign Hill in Ballarat, Victoria, a “living history” museum.

The letters contained many narratives and narrative fragments and strongly demonstrated that for these respondents a great deal of museum visiting was experienced through the mediating influences of personal and socially sanctioned narratives. They appeared to come to museums with personal narratives and look for wider socially sanctioned narratives into which they can fit their own story.

From the analysis, these visitors used narratives to explain their responses to the museum. They used museums, and the narratives on offer there, to consolidate family relations, to admonish children, to reinforce values for family members. There was also a great deal of pleasure generated by their experience of the museum and its stories. The family, both actual and idealized, seemed to be the focus much more than the learning of new ideas. There was a distinct emotional