

Kultur und Sightseeing
Museen, Kulturstätten und Touristik
Fachtagung des AsKI e.V. in der Kunsthalle Bremen am
8. und 9. Mai 2003

The Client As King – Visitor Service in German Museums

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Hello, I'm Nigel Cox – as was noted in the introduction, I am a New Zealander; right now I'm Head of Exhibitions & Education at the Jewish Museum Berlin. People always ask what a non-Jewish New Zealander who doesn't speak German is doing working there – this is the short history: I'm a professional writer, have published novels and so forth; in 1995 I joined what was to become Te Papa, the new national museum of New Zealand, as Senior Writer. Five years later, my boss, Ken Gorbey, who had been Director of the Museum Project at Te Papa, was invited to come to Berlin to direct the development of the Jewish Museum Berlin. He invited me to join him.

Te Papa is something of a controversial museum and it is through that controversy that I want to approach my subject for today. That subject is, Visitor Service. But the title of this talk also uses the word "client". Words of this sort were commonly used during Te Papa's development phase. Another key word was "customer" – all our visitors were to be thought of as being our customers. Thus you can see that the museum was taking the approach that we were a retail business competing in a marketplace to make sales, and to achieve success we had to adopt business methods. But what were we selling?

Te Papa saw itself as being in the "leisure industry". It's not work for visitors to come to a museum – they visit museums during their leisure hours. Thus the museum's competitors were:

- The movies
- The zoo
- Sports events
- Television
- Shopping – according to all surveys, shopping is the preferred leisure time activity for New Zealanders.

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In the leisure field, a great deal of money is spent on promotion, and competition for “customers” is very fierce. So how did the museum plan to compete?

- A two-person Tourism department began work two years before the museum opened.
- A large full-time Marketing staff promoted the museum for over a year before it opened – etc – I won't go on about this aspect, many of these approaches will be familiar to you from your investigations into modern American museum practice, and from other speakers at this gathering.

But the main energy went into being what was called “customer focused” – developing every aspect of the museum so that, without compromise, every decision relating to any part of the museum was based on asking, “What would our visitors want?”

Thus the museum...

- used professional writers – like myself, with no previous involvement in museums – to write every piece of text in the museum – rather than curators;
- wrote texts that were directed at the visitor who had almost no previous knowledge of the subject; and no previous interest in the subject – thus, the museum's texts thought it was their job to create the interest.
- Developed a force of professional Hosts – I will say more about this later
- Removed any sense of the museum being policed or a restricted place. There are no security guards at Te Papa; no visible security systems.
- Researched what the audience was interested in and then directed exhibitions towards that.
- Branded the museum so as to make it seem welcoming - the Te Papa brand was “our place”. I personally found this phrase rather sickening. But our visitors liked it very much; they said it made them feel as though the museum belonged to them.
- Made exhibits that were highly interactive – lots of hands-on – and easy to change – this was in response to Visitor Research findings that those who did not usually visit museums don't visit because “museums are dim, dusty places where you aren't allowed to touch anything and where nothing ever changes.”
- Made a museum that was generally bright, colourful, noisy, - in short, informal.

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This approach was very successful. In its first year the museum had 2.2 million visitors – now, five years later, visitation is holding steady at 1.2 million visitors a year. When you remember that the total population of New Zealand is only 4 million, and that Wellington is a city of only 300,000, that is pretty impressive.

As I said, the museum is controversial. It was much criticized for being too populist in its appeal, not serious enough. In fact, what most critics objected to was the tone – bright, colourful, noisy, informal.

And here we come to the centre of what I think is my subject today. It is clear, I think, if you start with the attitude that the client is king – that is to say, that your museum will be the kind of place that all potential visitors want it to be, then the traditional museum audience – which usually includes all cultural critics – will not like the museum.

This issue was at the centre of discussions about Te Papa. Critics said the museum was successful because it had dumbed itself down.

What got lost in this discussion, I think, was the way Te Papa succeeded, at least in part, through great visitor service. No-one ever mentioned the way the museum had challenged itself to meet the standards of its non-museum competitors – for too long, in my opinion, museums have said to their visitors, This is a museum, so lower your expectations. The critical debate never acknowledged the fact that Te Papa had:

- excellent Toilets – enough of them; sparkling clean; well-signposted
- Excellent and varied food services – a five-star restaurant, plus a bistro, plus a coffee bar
- Free public telephones
- A money machine so that you could withdraw cash
- A post-box so you could post letters
- Kept itself open every single day of the year, including Christmas Day, and for long hours – this was greatly inconvenient to the museum but hugely appreciated by visitors
- Kept free entry

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- An “information about the city” service, including free maps
- Excellent baby-changing and parenting facilities
- Enough seats
- Free guarderobe – no queues
- Parking on-site
- Taxis on-site
- Buses that came right to the museum – all these things were arranged specially
- A service-oriented shop – take any currency, post anywhere
- An all-day child centre – this was something like a creche, it was for children 2 to 7 years old, but it had a museum program associated with it

Certain other policies were very important here. All exhibits were to be working at all times – anything that broke down was to be repaired within twenty minutes, or taken off the floor.

The exhibits were strongly considerate of the needs of children – too strongly, thought some critics – but this was very much appreciated by the family groups.

However, the strongest factor in servicing the visitors was the museum’s staff of trained Hosts. There were up to 20 Hosts on duty every day. They were employed eighteen months before the museum opened and given intensive training. They had no expertise in the museum’s subjects. They were trained in:

- Security procedures – the museum had no other security staff
- First aid
- People management – how to welcome, how to engage – the most important aspect we looked for when hiring was that they were people-oriented and very friendly.
- Communication with foreigners – special points of cultural sensitivity
- The particular needs of the blind and those in wheelchairs

During the first two years of the museum’s existence the Hosts won every customer service award that was offered by the hospitality and tourist industries. They were

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always the first thing mentioned in every survey of what people liked about the museum.

The Host force was of course invaluable for addressing ordinary, every-day problems in presentation of the museum – when things go wrong, there's nothing like having a trained human being with a walkie-talkie there to smooth things over. But the main task they had was make people feel welcome. This is a key point. Our visitor research said that non-visitors to museums didn't come because they felt museums didn't want them. They felt unwelcome. They thought the complicated words in the texts were for other people, not for them. They felt they had to be on their best behaviour – people felt they had to tip-toe round. The Hosts changed all that. They wore bright – some people said garish – uniforms in a style that is known as “fun shirts”. They engaged with visitors, offered to help them, asked them if there was anything they could do. “Is there anything I can help you with?” This is what a salesperson in a retail store says. But those people are selling physical products. In a museum that has no entry fee, what are the Te Papa Hosts selling?

I said the museum was branded as “our place” – that's how people viewed it, as something that they owned. Thus, when the museum showed a controversial art exhibition which included items offensive to some religious people, the comment was, “That's not ‘our place’.” This caused a philosophical crisis in the museum – if your mission is to always give people what they want, what do you do when they are offended? On this occasion Te Papa was brave and stuck to its guns, but I think the fate of the original Enola Gay exhibit in the Smithsonian is instructive here.

A common criticism of customer focused museums is that they pander to public taste – that market research is used to find out what the public wants, and then gives it to them – and what the public wants is bread and circuses. I don't think it's that simple. A museum that consistently presents lowest-common-denominator exhibits will soon lose its expert curatorial staff – and without such people the museum quickly becomes a mere exhibition hall. Without its reputation it loses authority – and, surprisingly quickly, then begins to lose its audience. People have to trust a museum. But audience research is only a tool. I want to give a quick example here. Te Papa wanted to dedicate a significant part of its permanent exhibition to something called

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the Treaty of Waitangi – this is New Zealand's founding document and, since it formally established the relationship between white people, like me, and the Maori people, it is naturally New Zealand's most controversial subject, much debated in the media, schools, universities and at every level of society. When the museum was being planned, a list of 100 possible exhibition topics was researched – the findings indicated that the Treaty of Waitangi was second-to-bottom in things that people wanted an exhibition about; that they actively did not want the museum to make an exhibition on this subject – it had been too much debated, they were sick of it.

The museum took this information and made great changes to the proposed exhibition. Its title was changed so that visitors wouldn't realise it was about the Treaty. Its design also concealed the fact. Further research revealed that, although they were sick of the subject, most New Zealanders had never read the actual words of the Treaty. So the words were presented very dramatically, thirty feet high, and in front of them were placed the most comfortable couches in the museum. And this worked. People plonked themselves down, read the words of our founding document and thought about them for the first time in their lives.

There are many other examples of how using visitor research does not compromise what a museum does, but rather ensures that what it does it does effectively.

So: Te Papa.

Holding Te Papa in mind, I am now planning to turn my attention to my experience of visitor service issues in German museums.

When Ken Gorbey and I came to work in Berlin, we carried many of the assumptions from Te Papa with us. But these assumptions did not always easily fit into the German context.

For example, in developing the Jewish Museum's mission statement (it was a surprise to some of the staff that we might need a mission statement) we could not get agreement to use the word "customers." This was the subject of a great deal of discussion. It was felt that this word was "too commercial, too American, for Germany." This was in my opinion a significant discussion. A line in the sand was being drawn here. One aspect of this was anti-Americanism – many ideas that we proposed were rejected on the basis that they were too American – this seemed to be

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sufficient to mean that they were bad. Now I am not trying to be ingenuous here – in New Zealand when we tried to introduce a code of conduct that was titled The Te Papa Way the staff rebelled – “too American.” And this was before the recent war in Iraq.

However, there is, in my opinion, a great deal of anti-Americanism about in the German museum world. And while this is understandable, too much of this anti is excused by setting up straw men. Too many people say, “Oh, we don’t want to be like Disney!” and forget that Disney offers stunning customer service and is highly successful. Many of the ideas developed by the American entertainment industry can successfully be adopted in the museum field without compromising the integrity of museums. And I believe they must be – otherwise too much uncompetitive, tradition-based practice will go unchallenged.

Another idea that was advanced only with difficulty was the notion of using professional writers – outsiders – to write the exhibition text. This too was felt to be “un-German.” The notion of setting strict word limits for texts was countered with the statement that “visitors to German museums like reading long texts.” We were even told that “visitors to German museums expect to be bored.” When we challenged this by saying, Yes, but do they want to be bored?, this was regarded as an annoying question. I note with interest that the most recent book I have seen on museum development in Germany has a chapter titled something like “How can we get rid of the never-read newspapers on the walls?” – so, maybe things are changing here? Certainly the research that my staff has done on the use of text in museums in Germany tells us that this is no different from the use of text anywhere in the museum world. So I would translate the statement, “German museum visitors expect to be bored” as really saying, “Go away and let us make the exhibitions as we want to make them, which is for ourselves and our colleagues.”

That’s fighting talk, I know, but it is my experience.

This is not the case just with the Jewish Museum – I was recently asked to give a talk on the use of professional writers in museums by the director of the new Deutsches Technikmuseum because – this was my impression – her staff were very resistant to the idea. This resistance has been encountered whenever I have been asked to give this talk – I was also a consultant on text systems to the new National Museum of

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Australia and there the resistance was just as high. The idea that professional communicators might, in the interests of visitor service, be the best people to provide the means of communication is not yet an idea that is welcomed in the museum community.

The proposal that the Jewish museum would make its visitors happy by being open every day of the week also drew a bitter response – “We need to close at least one day a week so we can do our work in the galleries!” But the visitor service argument won out here – so the museum is closed for only 4 days a year. This does pose difficulties for conservation and object management staff – I admit it. But it is very popular with visitors. Visitation on Mondays, when most other Berlin museums are closed, is rising steadily.

The Jewish Museum has, you will notice, a highly professional security arrangement at its entrance. There are airport-type scanners which every visitor must walk through, an X-ray machine which scans all bags, personal searches by trained and armed guards. The visitors have repeatedly complained about these guards – they say they look menacing and unfriendly; the word “gorilla” was used – and also complained about the security system, which causes long queues and delays. So I have had meetings with the guards and we are trying out ways of making them more welcoming. They have agreed, for example, to experiment with all wearing a flower in their lapel. One of the guards suggested that they all should wear a smiley-face button, and to my amazement, this was agreed to! So we will see if it has any effect. It is hard for security guards to do their job and not look a bit aggressive – it goes with the job. But I appreciated it that they were prepared to try.

But do we really need all this security? Ken Gorbey and I challenged this, and were told, “You do not understand what it is to be a Jew in Germany!” But our challenge has been taken up by the museum’s new director, Cilly Kugelman, who is both German and a Jew. The subject is a complex one – you could, for example, argue that the museum is being customer-focused by providing for the security and safety of its visitors. My own opinion is, the mission of the museum would be best served if this security system was removed – this would free up a great deal of badly-needed cash to do more research, make better exhibitions, make many much-needed improvements to the museum. The security system at the Jewish Museum

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seems to me to be fetishistic – extreme, unnecessary and unwelcoming – and therefore not visitor-focused.

Another proposal that seemed extreme was the idea put forward from within the staff that the museum's only restaurant should be closed to visitors from 12.30 until 1.30 every day so that the staff could have lunch there. Needless to say, this was resisted. But that it could even be suggested shows an astonishing attitude to the people who after all are the reason that the museum exists, which is its visitors.

That's a key point for me: a museum exists for its visitors, not for its staff.

Now: I mustn't give the impression that the staff of the Jewish Museum were all against the ideas I have been outlining. Quite the opposite is true. When asked to describe the attitude of German museums to visitors, they all laughed and agreed on one word: "Unwelcoming!" And they were all excited by the prospect of trying to make a visitor-focused museum in Germany, and really worked to be part of that.

It's just that it's not simple. Yesterday, for example, which was a hot day in Berlin, while I was having lunch in the courtyard I saw that in the garden the sprinklers were on. This meant, because the grass was wet, that none of the visitors could sit on it. So now I am working with the Building Manager to try to get the watering done at the end of the day. But this is not very convenient for the Building Management staff. So we will work on that until we find a solution.

One idea that was successfully imported from Te Papa was the use of museum Hosts. In the Jewish Museum the host uniforms are less garish and their manner is less informal than in Te Papa. But I have no criticisms of our Hosts; they do a wonderful job – proving that it is possible for German museums to be welcoming. They are excellent at assisting the visitors with their needs, and are always given the highest expressions of appreciation by visitors who are surveyed. It costs us a lot to train and staff the museum with Hosts – but this is an investment in customer service that we regard as a key part of the museum's success.

It is interesting to note that we have had to look for younger Hosts. That is because the museum's visitation is very strong in the 18-23 age group. The reverse was true at Te Papa. There, at the beginning, all our Hosts were young, and lots of our visitors turned out to be 50 or older. The age profile of the Host force should al-

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ways reflect the age profile of the visitors – visitors are more comfortable being attended to by their peers.

Thus it seems to me a problem that at Berlin's new Post Museum, which has robots playing in its entrance lobby – highly attractive to the museum's target audience of younger visitors – that the staff who work there are older and, frankly, seem out of place.

The staff at that museum, and at many others I have visited in Germany, seem to think that their main job is policing the visitors. At Berlin's Hamburger Bahnhof, for example, one day when I was there the staff could be heard constantly shouting at visitors in a large hall where there was a special piece of floor that was not to be walked on. It was almost as though the guards liked doing this shouting. I'm sure this is not true – but there was no sign and a large window that naturally drew people to the forbidden piece of floor.

In fact that visit to the Bahnhof, which is an art museum, offered an interesting contrast to a visit made on the same day to the Natural History Museum which was one hundred metres down the road. The audiences at these museums could not have been more different. At the Bahnhof, ours were the only children – and we strongly felt that they were not welcome. There was absolutely nothing directed towards their focus of attention – nor was there anywhere to leave a pram, nor was it allowed to take a pram. The staff frowned if our children ran or made any noise. This museum was saying, You are not welcome here. One hundred metres down the road, the staff of the Natural History Museum could not have been more welcoming. The atmosphere was much more relaxed. There was a good place to leave prams and so forth.

Now: I am not saying here that all museums must always welcome all kinds of visitors equally. There's a place for the obscure, for the difficult and seemingly elite, presented in a rarefied if not to say exclusive and excluding atmosphere.

But that particular mode very quickly, I suggests, tends to become the mode for the museum world, the one that everyone aspires to, the one that everything must be judged again. And this is very damaging – in my opinion, critics who insist that museums must be made in an elitist mode do museums, and culture in the broadest sense, great damage. One of my Jewish Museum colleagues once said to me scorn-

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fully, “This idea that everything has to be inclusive, has to be for all kinds of people – that’s from the 1970s.” This is probably true but to me it’s an idea that should still be alive. There are I think two perspectives which make me think this, one idealistic and one pragmatic. Idealistically, it is the broad spectrum of society who pay for museums, through taxes, or through Lotto – which is money which comes from the broadest audience imaginable. I suggest that the people who pay for museums should feel that the museums made with their money are for them – not for an elite group who is determined to make everyone else feel they don’t belong.

And - to take now the pragmatic perspective - it is obvious to everyone that funding for museums in Germany will be harder to come by in the next ten to twenty years. In that period, the funds will flow much more readily to those museums that are full of engaged, interested visitors; museums that can demonstrate they are, dollar for dollar, giving a good return to the community that has invested in them.

I say the word “full” with some emphasis. In my opinion it is customer- focused to want your museum to be full. I say this because I gradually came to believe that most of the criticism of Te Papa could actually be reduced to an essential core, which amounted to, “I don’t want to be in a museum that attracts all kinds of people.” People actually stated, “I would like to be on my own in the galleries; I don’t want anyone else to be there” – this in a facility that cost \$NZ320 million of public money! They objected to the many children, to the informality – to the museum’s very popularity. This goes to a key question, one that lies at the heart of visitor service, and at the meaning of museums: who are museums for and what are they selling?

Thank you.