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**From history to reality - engaging with visitors in the
Imperial War Museum (North)**

ABSTRACT

This paper explores visitor management in a modern museum, focussing on the case study of the Imperial War Museum (North). Visitor management issues have an increasingly important significance in ensuring the smooth delivery of a museum's core aims and in ensuring accessibility, both physical and intellectual, to all as part of the widening participation agenda, and managing visitors and their needs is of paramount importance. The idea of what the role

and function of museums are is at an interesting point: museums have changed over the last few decades from being places which were primarily about collections, to being places now focussed more on education (Falk & Dierking, 1992). Modern museums can be considered as being part of the leisure industry, and are increasingly subject to financial and marketing considerations which, rightly, put the visitor at the centre of their thinking and planning.

The key findings are that museum must seek to engage with their audiences in order to maximise their visitor potential.

Key words: visitor management, museum, visitor attractions, stakeholder, visitor satisfaction

INTRODUCTION

Museums are about experiences, education and entertainment, and visitor management is about planning to meet the visitor needs in that context.

Visitor management in museums is multi-dimensional. In addition to the usual customer care aspects common to all visitor attractions, museums must interpret heritage themes and collections for the enjoyment and understanding of a variety of different user groups. They must develop visitor management strategies to make culturally – and physically – sensitive objects

accessible to a wide range of visitors with both specialist and more general interests. Planning for appropriate visitor management is central to all they do in terms of conservation, interpretation and facilities management.

Visitor management is a fundamentally human process, and to that extent it is subject to human flaws and idiosyncrasies. The process of visitor management enables organisations to look ahead and make provision for expected, and even unexpected, occurrences (Howie, 2003). The point of visitor management is to address the basic issues of how to attract the public to an attraction, and how to cope with them when they do come. In the case of the IWM North this also includes how to preserve and conserve the collections which form the exhibitions, and therefore the purpose of the museum, as well the building and its environs.

There are many reasons why people visit museums. Certainly, museum visiting is a popular activity with over fifty six million visits per year in the UK and visitor numbers compare favourably with other leisure activities (Museums and Libraries Association, 2005). However, that may just be the point: visiting a museum is perhaps just another leisure activity and the prime motivators may not be as “worthy” as most commentators have assumed (Black, 2005).

Determining what really matters to cultural consumers is complex and

methodologies to assist in unravelling such complexities are not easily identified because visitor motivations are a complex area to investigate and perennially changing.

This paper explores visitor management in a modern museum, focussing on the case study of the Imperial War Museum, North (IWM). This case study was chosen because the IWM (North) is a striking example of a large, free-at-the-point-of-use museum which was opened in Manchester, England on 5th July 2002. The museum was purpose built with the intention of establishing a branch of the Imperial War Museum in the North of England. Consequently the museum is well placed to serve as a case study in which aspects of visitor management in a modern museum are considered because visitors and planning for their needs was given consideration at the earliest stages of the design process.

Role and Function of Museums

Museums have dual roles: functional and purposive (Wood and Rentschler, 2003). The functional role includes the role of acquiring, conserving, communicating, and exhibiting artefacts for study and education. The

purposive role has a much more humanistic approach and focuses on visitors' enjoyment and education from collections which are held in trust for society. Different museums approach their role differently: functional museums are mostly object based and internally focused; purposive museums are externally focused and people based (Wood and Rentschler 2003). The Imperial War Museum would place itself firmly both as a functional as purposive museum, with a more dominant approach to the purposive elements of education and enjoyment.

Welsh (2004) identifies three domains that are fundamental to any museum, viz.: materiality, engagement, and representation. These domains form the core of any museum's purpose, and relate to the way in which museums interact with the public and the collection. It is in this way that museums are different from other leisure orientated activities: often there is a collection which forms the core of interest and often acts a motivator in itself, but not always. Some museums may choose to design and build exhibits based on specific themes.

Informal Learning.

Museums and other information based leisure settings are becoming increasingly important as society changes from an industrial to a knowledge

economy (Falk & Dierking, 2000). Learning will increasingly be in the domain of leisure in a way which it has not fully been before, and informal learning will take on a new significance and museums, archaeological sites, heritage sites and their like will be an important conduit through which information can be acquired (Packer and Ballantyne, 2002). Uzzell (1998) suggests that “museums and Interpretive centres can be seen as places where people come to understand themselves” (Uzzell, 1998, 16). This is something of a grand claim, and must be viewed in the context of who actually visits museums in the first place.

Museums, Learning and Entertainment.

Museums do, though, have a perceived function which is linked to engaging the public and contributing to a wider social good (Stephen, 2001). Recently there has been a renewed awareness of the contribution that museums can make to lifelong public learning (Anderson, 1997a; 1997b). Weil (1990) suggests that it is useful to distinguish between the function and purpose of museums. Museums may well have a social and leisure function, but that is distinct from their purpose. Museums are often centred on collections and the single most obvious characteristic that distinguishes museums from other

parts of the leisure industry is that they *have* collections and themed displays. Indeed, Weil (1990) argues that it is important when considering museums to start from the premise that such collections are the *function* of museums and the *purpose* of museums is to provide an important benefit to the public by making such collections accessible and appealing. Therefore the actual collection itself *is* of primary importance when considering the function of a museum, but of secondary importance when considering the museum's purpose. IWM (North) is, like many other museums, is a themed museum, which offers access to war artefacts and relates them to themes of conflict and its consequences, allowing public to experience them in a tangible way.

Different museums have different collections but central to their purpose and function is the fact that people want to view such collections. The contemplation of such collections leads to an improved comprehension of the world we live in (Goodman, 1985 as cited in Weil, 1990). Museums globally exist in the context of displaying a version of the truth or facts and increasingly visitors, drawn from an increasingly multi-cultural society are questioning the authorised versions of events and often the perspective of the exhibits on display (Cameron, 2005). Therefore museums have an additional function of considering a multiplicity of viewpoints and opinions in order to fulfil their

purpose. IWM provides a range of audiovisual and interactive experiences (e.g. 3D Timeline) that give visitors glimpses of various facets of conflict. This is particularly relevant to the role of museums in providing experiences that leads to empathy.

The actual taxonomy of the collection and the fact that museums are frequently of differing character does not detract from the goal of allowing contemplation of the collection for the public good, and making such contemplation possible remains a core aim of all museums (Weil, 1990).

Museums frequently have the aim of providing not just an educational experience, but also an entertaining one (McNichol, 2005).

Museums, then, are part of the education/leisure industry, and at times the distinction between education and leisure can seem somewhat blurred when considering the motivations of those that attend. Often visitors to heritage sites (and by extension museums) are not always clear as to their exact motivations themselves (Davies and Prentice, 1995). The distinction between leisure and education may be so fine as to merit no distinction at all. That is to say, museums are so configured to deliver education and leisure at the same time that the distinction becomes meaningless when considering the function

of a museum. What is noticeable about educational leisure settings is that most, if not all, have some key features in common:

- The setting provides real and direct experience of objects, places and people (Falk, Dierking and Holland 1995; Hooper-Greenhill 1995);
- Learning is voluntary, but information should be easily accessible (Falk et al, 1995);
- The visitor is the arbiter of what is learnt, and that is stimulated by the individual needs and interest of the learner/visitor (Hooper-Greenhill, 1995);
- Learning is often a social occurrence (Falk et al, 1995);
- Visitors appear in diverse ways: alone; in mixed groups; with a range of expertise and prior knowledge and experiences (Anderson, 1995; Davies and Prentice, 1995).

Museums therefore need to meet the needs and expectations of a very wide ranging potential client group, although it should be remembered that different museums cater for different interests.

The Imperial War Museum is no different in this regard, and it offers a unique collection which serves to draw visitors into the contemplation of how war impacts on lives (IWM website). This is a deliberate attempt to provide a broad appeal to the broadest possible audience whilst also acting as guardian, curator and preserver of an important national archive of war and conflict related artefacts which might otherwise be neglected or overlooked.

Visitor Management in Museums

Attractions with the highest level of management planning tend to perform the best, be more profitable and have a sounder basis for the future (Benckendorff and Pearce, 2003 as cited in Page and Connell 2009:209). The larger and more significant the attraction the more likely it is that the management engage in high level planning (Benckendorff and Pearce, 2003).

Successful management of individual attractions may well impact on the tourism product of a region, or even at a national level, largely because visitor attractions drive tourism and often provide the reason for making a trip in the first place (Leask & Yeoman [Eds] 1999). IWM North is part of a wider regeneration scheme of the Trafford Park area of Manchester

Hooper-Greenhill defines an audience as all those who might come (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994a). As she goes on to point out, that is different from all those

who do come. Modern museum management practice is to put the visitor at the centre of the experience, much as an audience for the visual arts might be considered, and there has been a shift in museum leaders' awareness of the pivotal role of the public. Many museums consider the perspective of the public when determining institutional directions and priorities (Anderson, 2004). Effective audience segmentation and engagement is an important aspect of managing museums in a way that maximises their value to the community. The diversity of IWM North's audience presents opportunities and challenges common to all museums, which involves designing audience engagement programmes that appeal to multiple segments. This is reflected in the visitor management practice at IWM North. However, to understand the visitor management plan at the institutional level it is first of all necessary to examine the full scale and scope of visitor management planning.

The Tourism Optimisation Management Model (TOMM) has as its goals the intention of optimising rather than limiting visitor activity (Hall and McArthur, 1998 as cited in Hall and Page, 2006), and it is this model of visitor engagement which underlies the approach to visitor management in attractions like the IWM North. This is in keeping with the desire to place the visitor at the heart of visitor management planning. Visitor management planning operates on a

number of levels. Individual attractions operate specific and localised visitor management plans that facilitate visitor flow around a site and encouraging engagement with exhibitions and artefacts. The idea of how visitors use the museum must be closely linked to motivation to visit. It is essential the IWM North is able to motivate and encourage visitors to come to the museum in the first place.

Neil and Philip Kotler (1998) have given some consideration to the commercial aspects of museums when developing strategies designed to better meet the needs of visitors, but IWM North is free at the point of use, and relies on Government funding for the bulk of its operational income (IWM funding agreement, 2008). Consequently, its visitor management planning is freed from much of the commercial imperative affecting other types of visitor attraction, but this freedom also brings an obligation to meet the Government's inclusion and cultural agenda (MLA, 2006), and this is necessarily reflected in the museum's mission and planning. McPherson (2006) argues that museums will inevitably become more recreation focused and hybrid places combining leisure with learning. IWM North reflects this view in

its attitude to visitor management and engagement, with the emphasis on leisure in an educative setting.

Visitor management is not just about managing actual visitors on site. It is important to note that any visit is a three stage process; before the visit (the planning and information gathering stage), the visit itself (when a range of on-site measures are needed in order for the site to function safely and maximise visitor engagement); and after the visit (time for the visitor to reflect on the trip and hopefully recommend to others and repeat the visit at a later date).

Clawson and Ketch (1966, as cited in Hanlon, Fuller and Wilde, 2006)

identified a five-key dimensions in which visitors engage with any attraction.

These are anticipation; planning and thinking about the trip; travel to the site: getting to the destination; on-site behaviour: behaviour at the site or destination region; return travel; travelling home; and recollection of the trip at a later date (Clawson and Ketch, 1966; cited in Hanlon, Fuller and Wilde, 2006).

This process provides a useful indication of how visitors experience a visitor attraction and IWM is no exception.

With an attraction such as IWM North understanding its purpose and function is essential in order to construct a visitor management plan. IWM North set itself the following mission:

- Assisting in the overall cultural, educational, leisure and economic development of an area of regeneration in Trafford Park, accessible within two hours drive time for 15.5 million people.
- Stimulating interest, debate and understanding in conflict and its impact on society.
- Providing a striking building, the first in the UK by the internationally acclaimed architect Daniel Libeskind.
- Pioneering dramatic new techniques of modern exhibition design delivering new levels of accessibility to collections for museum visitors, including a new way of showing the Imperial War Museum's extensive sound and photograph archives.
- Providing the stage for a range of temporary exhibitions drawn from the Imperial War Museum collections, the local community or other national and international sources.

- Delivering an excellent education and learning resource to respond to the needs of people in the region. (IWM, 2008)

This serves to illustrate how the museum was concerned to put the visitor at the heart of its offerings whilst delivering its stated aim of commemorating service and suffering in war.

However, it is recognised by the museum that it needs to make that story meaningful for the visitor, and that creates some interesting challenges with regard to a visitor management plan.

The museum commissioned the architect Daniel Libeskind to create a building which would be visually striking and iconic as well as providing a space to display the many artefacts which make up the museum's collection. However, it is recognised by the museum that it needs to make that story meaningful for the visitor, and that creates some interesting challenges with regard to a visitor management plan. IWM North wanted to manage its space in such a way that it would bring a modern feel to what they regard as an essentially timeless story: how war has shaped lives. This meant that IWM North was looking to manage its visitors in such a way as to maximise the impact of what is, in

reality, quite a small collection which is available for display at the museum at any one time.

Research methods

The aim of this research is to investigate issues surrounding visitor management in the Imperial Museum of War (North), with specific focus on quality of visitor experience and best practices. To this end, a case study research was carried out. This research approach was employed to focus on the processes and the complexities of a visitor management in the case study visitor attraction (Stake, 2003; Jaspers, 2007; Dubois and Araujo, 2007). The case study method is particularly appropriate when examining or exploring a phenomenon that requires context and an overall view of the relationships between factors (Yin, 2009). Furthermore, it is suited to the study because it enabled multiple data collection strategies, flexibility in data analysis and the consideration of a broad range of literature (Stake, 2003). The research was undertaken in four main phases as follows:

1. An extensive literature review was carried out to visitor management in museums and visitor attractions.

2. Secondary data pertaining to the case study attraction was accessed and investigated in order to develop deeper understanding of the context of the visitor management issues.
3. Fieldwork was carried out at the Imperial Museum of War (North) in August 2009 in the form of participant observation, which involved carefully watching visitor behaviour and experiences at the museum (Dyer, 1995). The month of August was chosen as it is the peak holiday period, when multiple segments of visitors were likely to be present, allowing the researchers the opportunity of observing the widest possible range of visitor segments.
4. The data generated in the form of field notes were analysed using qualitative techniques of data reduction, data organisation and interpretation (Sarantakos, 2002). The results of data analysis are embedded in the sections that follow below.

There is scepticism about the advantages of a case study approach, and many question the value of the study of single cases, the potential for selective reporting, and are concerned with the dangers of possible distortion (Tellis, 1997; Gill and Johnson, 2002). However, it is also arguable that it does allow more in-depth study of a phenomenon, can facilitate the challenging of

existing theory, and provide sources for new research understanding and direction (Yin, 2009; Gomm and Hammersley, 2000).

Discussion of the findings

The following discussion is based on the authors' fieldwork, which involved observation of visitor activities and post-visit interviews focusing on their engagement with the museum.

IWM North has three exhibition areas: the Main Exhibition Space, Special Exhibitions Gallery and the Waterway; six display areas covering the key themes of twentieth century history supported by large scale objects which include an AV8a Harrier jump jet and a Russian T34 tank and the artillery piece that fired the first British shell of WWI and a 220 metre 3-D timeline chronicling twentieth century conflicts; a viewing platform, twenty nine metres high where visitors can see spectacular views of Manchester; a learning studio, corporate and event facilities, museum shop and café with panoramic views of the Manchester ship canal and the Lowry Gallery (IWM, 2008). The intention is to facilitate access to the collections for people with all levels of interest, not just those with a pre-formed interest in the topic, and in a variety of attention grabbing ways. The building itself is visually striking and designed to be

disconcerting in order to reflect the unsettling experience of conflicts,

something borne out by the following observation by a visitor:

“We went to the Imperial War Museum in London and the thing that struck me is how much it is about people and very little about logistics, less so here than in London where there is more weaponry. In some respects, what you see and feel inside in both museums is different from the name, Imperial says something Empire, War says something about the battle, armies, navies. It is not just about the past, it is about now and one of the last things we saw was about now. It is the personal side ... When we first walked in here, Sue said that “I don’t like the feeling, I am feeling uncomfortable” and when she opened the brochure, that is what is intended to be. It is a very powerful building.”

The 3-D timeline which runs throughout the main exhibition space allows visitors to walk around the gallery in a chronologically ordered way. It is a 220 metre line of objects, pictures, films and information points highlighting landmark events involving British and Commonwealth citizens from 1900 to the present day. These events are further personalised by the use of first hand accounts and stories of individuals caught up in the wider conflicts – rather like the visitor themselves in a way: it is intended to show that the wider conflicts involved individuals, who were no different to the men and women viewing the galleries in the present, thus engaging the visitor and making the displays appear more real and relevant. There are also audiovisual displays and interactive exhibits. Every hour, on the hour, a 360 degree film, audio and pictorial display plays around the gallery: the lights are dimmed and visitors are

surrounded by visual and auditory displays which illustrate a particular theme, such as children at war, or the Manchester Blitz (footage of which includes the very spot the museum is built on) thus engaging the visitor in a non-traditional way. This approach allows access to the subject on all levels to enrich the visiting experience for all (IWM, 2008), which was underlined by one of the visitors:

“it gives an experience of war and is very different to a standard museum in glass cases”. According another visitor, “I tell different people that you must come because it is not like a normal museum. You have to come and experience it”

The museum also has what it calls silos (an obvious military theme has permeated the nomenclature of the exhibitions). These silos are designed to allow visitors to explore the themes in greater detail. Six self contained display areas which focus on particular themes related to twentieth century conflict through a series of case studies allow visitors to explore the topic further, although it is entirely possible to absorb the atmosphere and the broad story which the museum wishes to impart without spending time in the silos. These exhibitions offer flexibility to update without the inconvenience of changing the main exhibition space, thus helping to encourage repeat visitors. Each silo can be updated independently of others and the main space, and this offers

the museum considerable advantages in allowing them to rotate their collection and displays. The access and flexibility provided at IWM (N) is something visitors appreciate, e.g., a comment from one visitor, who said:

“... It is nice because it is not too big so it isn’t a chore to look around... A letter is lying here, you can read through the letter and you can get in depth information.... Read what it says rather than just quotes and stuff...”

There are also Time Stacks prominently displayed and built into the walls of the silos. These are mechanical storage retrieval systems which have fifty or so themed trays of objects from the museum’s collection. Each are over six metres high and visitors can call up any particular tray they wish. A member of staff is on hand to offer interpretive advice twice daily and it is also possible to actually handle selected artefacts under the guidance of the member of staff, known as an interactor. The time stacks themselves were adapted from industry, but the museum is rightly proud that they are the first museum to use them in a way which encourages visitor engagement and interactivity with historical material (IWM, 2008).

It is an important part of the visitor management strategy and plan at IWM (North) that visitors are able to interact with the exhibits in order for the museum’s message to be delivered in a stimulating and interesting way which

would be relevant to their lives today. The museum aims to make their collections accessible and relevant to all visitors, irrespective of age, gender, cultural background or any other characteristic. In particular the museum wants to develop its audience and spread its message, and for that to happen it was considered that visitors were to be placed at the centre of planning which meant the museum was to be dynamic, not static. This strategy seems to be working well:

“The sound and light show really brought the story of the war home.. I could see it and I could feel what they went through.. that bit where they showed the bombing was unbelievable..... that happened where we were standing Incredible...75 year ago it would have been real bombs...’ stated one of the younger visitors.

The authors observed a high degree of visitor interaction during their visit to the museum. Good use was made of the interlocutors, and visitors were observed to be following the suggested routes around the exhibitions, noticeably taking time to read the available interpretation and animatedly engaging with their visit companions. Good use was made of the time-stacks.

The museum endeavours to engage visitors, and thereby manage their visit, by encouraging visitors to follow a designated route through the galleries. It does

this by laying out displays and exhibitions in such a way as to manage visitor flow: exhibitions have a designated start and finish point for example. The way in is clearly signposted, and the displays themselves are arranged to encourage visitors to follow the chronological or thematic path which will allow the visitor to experience the story being told. Interpretive information is on hand in the display cases. The themes which the museum chooses to highlight can vary, and are often the subject of temporary exhibitions in the exhibition space next to the main gallery.

IWM North had 239,853 visitors in 2008, an increase of 9% on the previous year (Association of Leading Visitor Attractions (ALVA), 2013). Visitor numbers have climbed steadily since: 236,529 in 2009; 247,600 in 2010; 302,298 in 2011 and 328,523 in 2012 (ALVA, 2013). The museum uses visitor management as a way of enhancing the visit and increasing access to the collections: over six million photographs, 120 million feet of cine film, 23,000 hours of sound recording as well as a collection of war themed art, in fact the Imperial War Museum is second only to the Tate Gallery as a repository of twentieth century British art, although the bulk of the collection is located at IWM South (IWM, 2008). The museum wanted to find engaging ways of displaying the collections in order for visitors to find out the stories which lay behind the objects and to

express the diversity of history and the multiplicity of viewpoints which are an inevitable consequence of the subject matter. In particular, the museum wanted people to be inspired by their visit and by history which in turn could inspire visitors to find out more about the past and the present (IWM, 2008).

This was something that the visitors warmed to and they appeared to appreciate the intimacy afforded.

'I like it here.. it is the third time I have been here.. because I find something new every time I come here....and it is good to just pop in... it is a small and manageable.. I do not get overwhelmed with stuff here...and I could touch some of the things on display', said one of the local visitors.

The IWM North does bring the wars and conflicts to the level of common human experience. The visitor management plan, exhibits and interpretation services at the museum do facilitate visitor engagement with history and transforms it into an accessible reality with the help of individual narratives of the war experience. This is something that was observable from the visitor activities and confirmed by many respondents. For example, one of the older visitors recalled:

"you see all this and the funny thing is it (war) still happens today... I was a child in the war.. and it was horrible... the war was part of my life.. my growing up... but the museum has taught me that the other people had it tougher...and we still got a war going on today".

As McLean (1993) points out, the problem for the museum profession is not so much how to enhance the experience of the public, but how to ascertain what that experience is. Therefore the museum needs to maintain the focus on the visitor. Its objectives over the short, medium and long term should be visitor engagement and education which will inevitably assist in sustainable growth in visitor numbers. Findings of this study would suggest that the key factors in a visitor management plan which would achieve this are:

- Ensure effective communication with visitors and potential visitors. Make people aware of what the museum offers.
- Identify who visits the museum, and why. Focus on the key satisfiers like new exhibitions and family history and genealogical research.
- Work to attract non-museum goers; ensure visitors become repeat visitors; turn regular visitors into advocates.
- Enhance access, both physical and cultural.
- Consider the visitor experience: how do they view the museum?
- Offer a range of experiences and levels of engagement.
- Establish community links which further the museum's aims and mission.
- Visitor flow controlled by signage and gallery layout incorporating a range of hard and soft techniques.

Museums are examining their role and function and are moving towards a much more visitor centred approach. One of the things which make that particular task difficult is the fact that the museum profession is not entirely clear as to what the museum experience is, nor always fully conversant with why people visit in the first place (McLean,1993). Visitor motivations are multi-faceted, complex and not necessarily fully understood by the visitors themselves. If a museum is able to deliver a well organised, interactive and well interpreted exhibition it will appeal strongly to potential visitors who are likely to be in social classes that are more affluent in the main, and will have an interest in history and the desire for a good day out. Audience development is likely to be a key area for museums in the future as they find their audience is increasingly likely to be seeking entertainment (a good day out) and be drawn from a wider social spectrum.

CONCLUSION

This paper analysed the visitor management of IWM North and considered its objective of engaging with visitors with a view of interpreting the history in an accessible way to each visitor, so that they were able to interact with their own history. Increasing visitor numbers in a sustainable manner is a key priority for the IWM North's visitor management plan. Whilst there were not any immediate concerns about the visitor numbers, any visitor management plans have to consider engaging with visitors and a potential increase in the visitors. Whilst the museum can comfortably increase visitor numbers without saturation at the moment, innovative interpretative tools need to be a key feature of engaging with the visitors along with signage and gallery layout to facilitate ease of use.

Visitor management and audience development can be seen as being closely related in the IWM North. As Black (2005) argues museum management is about providing cohesive leadership and visitor-focused public programming while making sure there is ease of access for the visitors. There are many examples of innovative curatorship in the IWM North which facilitates

engagement between history and reality in the context of a successful community museum that celebrate the coming together of the past and present. However, in an era of multiplicity of leisure choices, which, for example, include the latest home entertainment systems and the Internet, museums face a major challenge of maintaining their relevance and justifying investment. Museums have to find ways of appealing to the widest possible social spectrum through innovative methods of engagement and entertainment, recognition of which is crucial to IMW (N) to meet its objectives of stimulating interest, debate and understanding of conflict and its impact on society.

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