Taking interpretation evaluation out of the 'too-hard basket'

Aside from the numbers on the bottom line, there's a sure-fire way to know how your visitor experience is performing and what you can do to improve and refresh it. You only need to know what your visitors say, do and feel in relation to what you offer.

Many tourism businesses and organisations these days understand the need to invest in interpretation as part of creating an appealing, effective visitor experience. However, they often don't get around to incorporating interpretation monitoring and evaluation into their business practices – it gets left in the 'too-hard basket'.

It's true that evaluation can be a complex matter. Yet even modest efforts can yield surprising results in learning and improvement. At the front end, it can even save dollars by helping you avoid costly mistakes.

Here's some ideas you might find handy –

Types of evaluation

Research for evaluation can be direct, as in customer interviews or survey forms, or indirect, such as observing visitor behaviour.

It can be quantitative (information that can be statistically analysed, often drawing on a large number of people) or qualitative (usually aiming to achieve a depth of understanding by exploring perceptions, opinions, emotional responses, often from a small number of people).

When to evaluate

A. At the front end, before implementation. For example, providing sample materials to focus groups (facilitated groups discussions) or random samples of people on site. These are often mockups of brochures or signs or prototypes of installations.

B. During the early stages of interpretation delivery. Some options include unobtrusive observations of the way visitors are responding to or using interpretation; noting increases or decreases in site impacts; or regular debriefing of frontline staff.

   This stage is particularly valuable for monitoring whether an activity or device needs modifying, removing or if a new one needs to be introduced.

C. After a reasonable period of operation, commonly each year. This is often a more extensive evaluation process than at the two earlier stages. At this point, evaluation is often focussed more on the entire interpretive program or delivery, including whether or not objectives have been met.

What to evaluate

As with other elements of the visitor experience, you should focus on the critical success factors for interpretation. Your goals and goal outcomes will help you identify these high priorities – those aspects of your interpretation that most matter in achieving your aims.

Who should do the evaluation?

There are two main choices – evaluation conducted in-house by you and/or your team; and evaluation that's outsourced to specialists.

Advantages of in-house evaluation include the fact that you and your team are familiar with your product (this can also be a disadvantage, in terms of objectivity), it can be cheaper to administer the evaluation, and the process of carrying out evaluation and arriving at conclusions can strengthen the team's commitment to and understanding of customers.

Advantages of out-sourced evaluation include the fact that you are buying in specialist expertise, it avoids subjectivity, and can give you the people-power you need to carry out evaluation if no-one on the team has the time.

Traps for the unwary

A warning or two for those new to evaluation –

- when gathering and reporting back on customer feedback informally, it can be easy to lose perspective, particularly if individuals on your team have strong personal views on what is working and what's not. Always check it out with visitors!
- make sure you listen to what your customers are actually saying, as opposed to what you might like to hear them saying.

You can't afford NOT to evaluate

Even if the budget's tight, you can do monitoring and evaluation.

Observation –

This can be relatively small-scale. Decide what information is useful to collect and then collect it systematically so that it's not just a set of opinions. It might be worthwhile to record what visitors pay attention to; how they move about (where do they linger? Do they stay on the track or away from fragile artefacts?); how much time they take; or what excites questions; aspects of group interaction. If you repeat observation regularly it can help map trends.

Observation can give you more accurate results than responses to visitor surveys as it records actual visitor behaviour as opposed to the visitors' perception of what they have done or how long they spent on certain aspects.

Focus groups –

Group discussions led by a facilitator don't necessarily require specialist skills. You'll need to define what information you need from the exercise, recruit a small group of people (8-10), have a facilitator who understands that his or her role is to use active listening and encourage open discussion, and record the discussions.

Let everyone know in advance that the session will be limited to an hour – no longer – and stick to the timing. After the session, analyse the information and determine conclusions.

It will be difficult to recruit visitors to participate unless there's something in it for them. Tourism operators have found that it can work if visitors are offered a bottle of wine, free meal complimentary tickets, or relevant merchandise.

In-depth interviews

A series of one-on-one interviews or interviews with small social or family groups can be useful for exploring issues and opportunities. Again, you need to consider what you can offer to entice visitors to participate. In preparing your questions, keep them simple, open-ended (avoiding questions that lead to a yes or no) and weed out any that are not essential.

Surveys

These can be exit surveys conducted face-to-face with visitors as they leave or self-administered using written questionnaires; or, using a database, they can be conducted by phone, email or mail-outs at an identified period after visitors depart.

Questionnaires should be clear, easy to understand and brief and easy to complete. It is absolutely vital that you are clear about what you want to know from those participating in the survey. These information needs will vary significantly from one business or organisation to the next.

Conduct a small pilot survey first to determine if there are any ambiguities in the questions or if questions need reframing to get the desired information.

Also consider how to design the survey so that you can analyse the data and use it in a meaningful way.

Research ethics require you to state to participants, either in writing or verbally, how information will be used. Give people the choice to provide contact details. A range of research principles are outlined in:

- *Code of Conduct for Market Research* developed, Australian Market and Social Research Society;
- • *Market and Social Research Privacy Principles*, Australian Market and Social Research Organisation; and the
- *ICC/ESOMAR International Code of Marketing and Social Research Practice.*

Anecdotal feedback

Frontline staff can gather a wealth of understanding from their interactions with visitors. It can be valuable to meet regularly for a focused debriefing, gathering information on staff observations, feedback they've received from customers etc. It can also be useful to conduct a group discussion on solutions to issues and problems.

This can be a valuable team-building exercise.

Useful links

Best Practice in Park Interpretation and Education, 1999 (includes evaluation section):

http://www.environment.gov.au/parks/publications/best-practice/interpretation-education.html

A Practical Guide to Evaluating Natural and Cultural Heritage Interpretation, 2001:

http://www.maq.org.au/programs/conf03/workshopBG.pdf

Interpretation Evaluation Toolkit, 2005 (how-to manual & CD package to evaluate face-to-face interpretation, available for purchase from Cooperative Research Centre for Sustainable Tourism:

http://www.crctourism.com.au/WMS/Upload/Resources/bookshop/FactSheets/flyerfinal%20new.pdf