

“DON’T FORGET THE GUIDE”

Observations on developing a culture of excellence in visitor experience

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Introduction

A couple of years ago the Jenolan Caves Reserve Trust engaged me to advise them on training programs for guides. A large part of their training resources on history consisted of a list of over 150 events and dates with no associative link enabling guides or visitors to place the events in a meaningful historical context. The similar remaining material in a hefty tome filled a useful role as a reference source. Unfortunately, however, it was being used as a training manual. But what’s the point of having the world’s most knowledgeable guide if the guests don’t get a great experience? There was too much emphasis on what was put into the training process and not enough on what the outcome was.

Surely, I thought, there must be a better way. These notes are based on my report, but the sections dealing with providing appropriate training have been excised. The notes are also based on my work at Jenolan, but have wider applicability, because what we’re dealing with here is human psychology.

My main message is that sometimes the cave itself makes the tour a memorable experience, more often it is the guide, and that in a total interpretation package, the guide is the critical factor.

Egypt

Some years ago my wife and I toured Egypt on an individual package which provided for ‘meet-and-greet’ facilities at airports, our own personal tour guide service in Cairo, Luxor and Aswan, and a tour boat cruise down the Nile. The guides were immensely knowledgeable and openly proud about the history and geography of their country and the archaeological and architectural treasures of the Cairo Museum, Giza and the Nile Valley. They had an answer for every conceivable question, and I heard people ask the most obscure and esoteric ones.

Obviously one could scarcely visit such sites without expecting a steady flow of information. Yet the ear hears what the guide is saying, the brain integrates it with what the eyes see and *may* form a pattern of understanding and appreciation, but somehow it is still not retained. Frankly, I can scarcely remember a word or a fact that they transmitted. What I do remember is a holistic appreciation of the achievements of the culture of ancient Egypt, the uncompromisingly high standard of service we obtained, even at a chaotic airport at 4am, the unfailing civility with which it was delivered, the educated and even scholarly fluency of knowledge transmitted, the grace with which those esoteric and downright inane questions were fielded, and the ability to know when a customer wanted to be let alone to appreciate, to let the senses drink it all in.

Of course, all this might be put down to expectations. Egypt is a third-world country, so there’s unexpected pleasure in receiving first class service. Or perhaps Australians are not used to receiving first class service even if they pay for it. Or perhaps they don’t even know what excellence in customer service really involves.

Chartres

Then on Easter Saturday a few years ago we visited the great medieval cathedral at Chartres near Paris. We joined a small group, maybe 10 or 15 of us, guided by an Englishman who had completed a PhD study of the iconography of the cathedral in 1956. He had lived in Chartres for 40 years and this was his life’s work. Nearly every day for those 40 years he shepherded one, sometimes two or three groups of pilgrims around the same stained glass windows, the same flying buttresses, the same gargoyles covered by pigeon droppings. When we started they all looked the same to me. Not when we finished. Every window and every gargoyle had a story to tell. The guide picked out two or three, the explanation was interwoven with medieval interpretations of biblical history, and somehow I felt transported back 800 years. Offhand I don’t remember what any one of them was about (although the guidebook could jog my memory, and this is an important point). But I do remember why the cathedral was there and not in the next little town, what its significance was, and its place in the social fabric of the Middle Ages. And it was truly a revelation; an experience which left us deeply, impressed, filled with new insights, wanting to know more some time.

It could have been so boring, as dry as the pigeon droppings on the gargoyles. And indeed it would have been if the guide had merely recited the names of forgettable characters on the stained glass, or the chronology of passing bishops, or tried to explain the meaning of each and every window and gargoyle. But he was highly selective in his interpretation. And he had so much more to offer – he had the passion, he brought it alive, he put the detail in a wider context, he explained the context rather than the trivia.

And yet I’ve seen plenty of cathedrals over the years – Westminster, St Pauls, St Peters, Cologne, Toledo, Notre Dame de Paris. It could have been a case of ‘seen one cathedral you’ve seen them all’. We only went to Chartres because it sounded like a nice place to go for the day. But Chartres was the one I will remember, because of that guide. And because of that guide, I can put the others in a context and understand so much more about the history of medieval Europe. Can we aim at the same outcomes for cave inspections?

Caves – what kind of interpretation?

So, to get to caves. The most impressive show caves I have ever seen are Jeita in Lebanon, Skocjan in Slovenia, and the well-known Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico. *In all three the guide effectively provided no interpretation to many visitors.* The first two did not offer English-language tours, while Carlsbad is self-guided and self-paced although guides are stationed at intervals to allow interaction. So what was so special about them? Well, they simply overwhelmed the senses. You walk through these caves almost transported. There was something new, something unexpected, something revealed and something learned at every bend.

Han Cave, Belgium

Two years ago I had a look at Han-sur-Lesse Cave in Belgium, an excellent tour offering a variety of cave experiences, though rather mass-produced. Here some of the visitor experience lies in the journey to and out of the cave. You arrive by tram, walk through the cave, and exit by boat. The guide was knowledgeable, passionate and committed, just like most guides I know in Australia. He was overwhelmed when I remained to talk about the cave. Indeed, he asked me over to his place for lunch and it turned out he'd once visited Jenolan. As in the previous case, I wondered what customers remembered of the tour.

One thing was different, though. Casual dress. The guide did not wear a uniform and I suspect this informality made a difference to the visitor experience. Why has no one questioned the wearing of uniforms by guides in Australia?

Soreq Cave, Israel

Here visitors first watched a 10-minute video near the cave entrance, available in several languages. This placed the historical heritage of the area in context (it was in Judea), covered the geological development and significance of the cave, and included a brief video tour of the forthcoming inspection highlights. The guide didn't say much, and that was in Hebrew anyway. But he didn't need to – the overall interpretation package did that, and the cave then spoke for itself. A small visitor centre at the exit added to the total experience. The cave was small and attractive but not outstanding – certainly it provided a contrast with the desert above. Yet it was memorable because the interpretation strategy, and presumably guide training, had taken into account not only the language problem but also some elementary psychology of learning involving a variety of delivery modes.

Arizona

A tourist cave near Tucson, Arizona provided a contrast. Sounding as though he had learnt it by rote, the guide had a standard patter related almost entirely to legend and mythology (which, admittedly, was all the cave had going for itself!). At the end the other visitors disappeared rapidly. When we lingered to ask questions and talk the guide seemed genuinely surprised and pleased that any visitor would actually be interested in his cave, as though meaningful interaction with customers was something extraordinary.

Guiding and interpretation as learning processes

Not every cave can be like Carlsbad. My message is that if the cave itself can't maximise the experience, the guide has to. Her job is to transform guests' expectations into a really memorable experience. A really successful learning experience is *transformational*. It doesn't just add to our understanding or perception, it positively transforms it, challenging our established pattern of thinking. As one Jenolan guide I spoke to put it:

“The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but provocation ...interpretation is a revelation based on information. All interpretation includes information but they are entirely different processes”.

This can happen when the experience is unexpected, when what is learnt is a true revelation. An analogy can be drawn with movies. There are feel-good movies with formulaic plots and predictable endings which make us feel good because, let's face it, that's what we expected when we went to see it. Then there are films, which cause us to leave thinking “*what was that really all about?*”, “*was there another interpretation, which I sensed but didn't quite grasp hold of?*” Why, after all, do people go to see the same movie twice or three times? Presumably because there was some quality in it that they wanted to relive, to place another interpretation on, to find some hidden meaning in.

I wonder whether one of the barriers to really successful, transformational interpretation and guiding is that tour groups are not sufficiently challenged. When paying their money people have an expectation of the kind of guiding they will receive, which on the whole, they recall from previous experience, is decidedly passive. *Because* they paid their money and this *is* their expectation, and because we want to make them feel they've received their money's worth, is there a tendency for guides to provide them with just that expectation, albeit livened up with some individual approaches, rather than seeking to maximise their experience?

Interpretation is a learning process. It has less to do with telling and more with having people work things out, question what they see, feel or hear, with being challenged and enriched by the experience. More of our training needs to be redirected towards encouraging this rather than transmitting ever more factual information. As another Jenolan guide observed:

“For me the essence of the job is being able to weave an extraordinary experience for the visitor from the wealth of information at your disposal and from the environment in which you encounter the visitor. The information could be historical, prehistorical, geological, mythological, fantasy etc. The environment will vary from cave to cave, group to group, person to person. At the end of the day the visitors want to have enriched themselves and have had a damn good time”.

What do visitors remember of their cave tour?

In general, learning psychology tells us that we remember more from doing things than from being told about them. An hour later, most cave visitors will remember as little as 5% of what you tell them, if that's the way you deliver it, perhaps more if you provide a variety of stimuli and time for reflection and reinforcement.

Teachers have traditionally been criticised for talking too much, and there is plenty of evidence showing that it is largely counter-productive. The same could be said of tour guiding. The paradigm of guide-as-expert, a transmitter of knowledge as such, must go. This is not to say that guides should not be expert practitioners, rather that they should exercise sound judgment in how to use and adapt their knowledge and skills in interpretation. Enthusiasm and creativity in delivery are far more effective than passive delivery of masses of information.

Interpretation therefore has to take into account variations in individual people's preferred learning style, and be presented in a variety of ways, which challenge the senses.

Fantasy, entertainment or science lesson?

Some criticism has been made that guiding and interpretation have moved too far away from fantasy and entertainment towards a diluted science lesson. There is no reason why interpretation cannot be fun and entertaining if that mode delivers the outcomes discussed above. Once again, this is an example of focusing too narrowly on the *inputs* to the process of interpretation, rather than on the *outcomes* of visitors' experiences.

Some guides have reduced a dependency on talking by using props such as music, singing, and even mundane objects like torches and flashguns, and there is scope for drama and improvisation. These innovations introduce an element of surprise into conventional tours, adding entertainment to education, and they deserve commendation. They have certainly greatly improved visitor experiences. However more innovation is needed to move away from the foundation on which they are built – the concept of the traditional inspection of one of the named caves.

Expecting the unexpected

(In the next sections some comments may have to be adapted to meet the needs of visitors to smaller cave parks).

Although innovatory theme tours have been developed with notable success in many areas, too many cave inspections remain just that: inspections of named caves. A Holden with all the bells and whistles is still a Holden. A tour of the Imperial Cave is still a tour of the Imperial Cave. A few traditional features may have been omitted to shorten tour times, but the product is often much the same. A standard fare is offered – the same cave tour at the same time on any particular day. Why?

What is driving the decision – managerial convenience and predictability, or maximising visitor experience?

Certainly some tours have to be guaranteed to meet the needs of coach schedules, and the need to provide for peak loads may narrow the possible offerings. However the rationale for general adoption of this practice has to be questioned.

I challenge the response that this is what visitors expect. *There is a significant difference between meeting visitor expectations, and maximising the quality of their experience.* Visitors may well expect the present arrangements because that is what they have learnt from experience to expect, not because it is the best way of organising tours to maximise the quality of their experience.

A paradigm shift to bring this about demands a corresponding change in promotional and advertising strategies. Marketing strategies could be adopted to promote more experiences in which visitors would be invited to step outside their comfort zone, and expect the unexpected.

Innovatory cave tours

A successful tour has already been developed around ghost stories of Jenolan, and the activities and discoveries of cave divers are highlighted on others. An entire tour could be woven around Jeremiah Wilson's motivations and sycophancies. A tour concentrating on aboriginal perspectives relating to the caves could be devised. As noted above, some of the world's best cave experiences occur where the guide says very little. Why not a cave tour, with questions and suggestions implanted in visitors' minds at the beginning of the tour (by video?) and maybe discussed on the way out, but silent inside the cave?

The nomenclature of many cave tours is less than inspiring. Just as the Plughole markets better than Elder Cave, perhaps consideration should be given to more enticing or descriptive names for some tours. The "Waters of Jenolan" tour provides a lead. How about "Following the Explorers Trail", perhaps, or "The Wizard of Jenolan" based on Nuri Mass's book?

Interpreting the history of Jenolan

The historical record of Jenolan Caves has been described as being like a microcosm or a slice through Australian history. There are themes related to the aboriginal dreamtime, to the convict era (Whalans), bushranging (perhaps!), pioneering individualism (Wilson), the taming and transformation of rural Australia, and to the concomitant growth of bureaucracy and middle-class affluence just on a century ago. There is a strong strain of the legendary folkloric hero. There is the neglect and complacency related to wars and depression, the rise of environmental awareness, even to the era of economic rationalism & divestment of government assets.

Unfortunately this element of social history does not appear to be part of the training resources presently available. A teacher would be very critical of the treatment of history in the current "Training Manual" mentioned above, which does no more than list over 150 events and dates with no associative link enabling guides or visitors to place the events in a meaningful historical context. It is a long time since history was about dates and chaps.

To appreciate more fully the tapestry of Jenolan history, visitors need associative links between events at the caves, and events or periods with which they can identify.

Does it add to the visitor experience to be told who discovered the Imperial Cave, and when? Does it matter whether it was Wilson or Cambridge? Why do visitors need to be told the often-obscure names given to particular decorations? Are there not ways of savouring the splendour of Commonwealth Dome without knowing its name or origin?

There is something about educators and guides that impels them to justify their role by talking. If a move away from traditional guiding is to take place, and visitors' experience is to be maximised, the urge to convey masses of interesting but largely irrelevant information should be abandoned.

Vast amounts of money are spent on hardening walkways, improving lighting systems and on visitors' centres. But visitors may remember even the most ordinary cave, especially if it's the first or only one they visit. But if it's a truly memorable experience that they want or that you would like them to have, it's the guide that makes the difference. Don't forget the guide.

Aiming at Excellence - A Checklist

If you're a guide

Aim at:

- *Maximising the experience, not merely meeting expectations*
- *Interacting rather than informing*
- *Transforming rather than informing*
- *Explaining the context rather than reciting the trivia*
- *Resisting the urge to talk too much*

If you're a manager:

- *Encourage and reward diversity in interpretation*
- *Consider an interpretation package rather than a simple in-out cave tour, especially for guests with limited English (e.g. video ->cave inspection -> time for questions / discussion ->visitor centre)*
- *Focus on what guests get out of the experience rather than the resources (physical & human) which you put into it.*
- *Get away from the mundane – promote and interpret the things, which are different about your cave (every cave has stalactites & stalagmites - surely everyone knows about them by now?)*
- *Distinguish between a reference or resource manual, and a training program*
- *If your guides wear uniforms, ask yourself why*
- **Remember, it is the guide that makes the difference**

DEVELOPING A CULTURE OF EXCELLENCE IN VISITOR EXPERIENCE

FROM this:

TO this:

<p><i>The cave tour is:</i> the same as it was yesterday</p> <p>based on transmission of knowledge (i.e. <i>cognitive</i> dimension)</p> <p>a diluted science <i>lesson</i></p> <p>an <i>informational</i> experience</p>	<p><i>The cave tour is:</i> different every time</p> <p>based on enthusiasm, stimulation & creativity (i.e. <i>affective</i> dimension)</p> <p>a <i>memorable</i> experience</p> <p>a <i>transformational</i> experience</p>
<p><i>The guide:</i> has a fund of knowledge which she exhausts on every tour</p> <p>is an 'expert' so he has an answer for everything</p> <p><i>informs</i> people</p> <p><i>talks</i> a lot</p> <p>makes <i>closed</i> statements e.g. "this stalactite is 50,000 years old"</p> <p><i>meets</i> customers' expectations</p>	<p><i>The guide:</i> has a fund of knowledge which she draws upon as appropriate</p> <p>admits to ignorance & invites visitor to guides' office to check answer</p> <p><i>interacts</i> with people</p> <p>talks less, but makes every word count</p> <p>includes <i>open-ended</i> questions and statements e.g. "I wonder why ...", "How do you think this happened?", "how could we work out how old this stalactite is"?</p> <p><i>maximises</i> customers' experience (i.e. gives them more than expected)</p>
<p><i>The visitors:</i> listen or react passively</p>	<p><i>The visitors:</i> are challenged, have their imaginations activated, go away wondering</p>
<p><i>Historical interpretation:</i> is a list of dates and discoveries</p>	<p><i>Historical interpretation:</i> associates with periods (not dates) with which people can relate e.g. "<i>when this district was first settled</i>", "<i>when SA was still a British colony</i>", "<i>in the time of your grandparents</i>"</p>