

Museum management and visitors book: there might be a link?

Anna Maria Miglietta

Ferdinando Boero

Museo di Biologia Marina "Pietro Parenzan", Università del Salento, Via Prov.le Lecce-Monteroni. 73100 Lecce.
E-mail: anna.miglietta@unisalento.it; ferdinando.boero@unisalento.it

Genuario Belmonte

Museo dell'Ambiente, Università del Salento, Via Prov.le Lecce-Monteroni. 73100 Lecce.
E-mail: genuario.belmonte@unisalento.it

ABSTRACT

The visitors' remarks in form of 1,480 written comments (messages) or entries, in the visitor's book of the Marine Biology Museum "Pietro Parenzan" (MBM) of Porto Cesareo (Apulia, Italy), over a period of nearly six years (July 2004 - March 2010) were analyzed. Many comments contained more than one opinion, with a total of 2,195 opinions. According to conceptual categories already identified by other authors as important during a museum visit, in this study we propose a conceptual key for the interpretation of visitors book messages, and a schema (Museum Opinions Chart) to subdivide visitors opinions. The aim is the possibility to use visitors comments to improve MBM management.

Keywords:

museum, visitors book, management.

RIASSUNTO

Gestione museale e visitors book: può esserci un collegamento?

Nel presente lavoro sono stati analizzati 1480 commenti scritti dai visitatori sul visitors book del museo di biologia Marina "Pietro Parenzan" (MBM) (Porto Cesareo - Puglia - Italia) in circa sei anni: dal luglio 2004 al marzo 2010. Molti dei commenti analizzati contenevano più di una opinione, per un totale di 2195 opinioni. In accordo a categorie concettuali già identificate da altri autori e considerate importanti nella visita ad un museo, proponiamo una chiave concettuale ed uno schema (Museum Opinion Chart) per l'interpretazione dei messaggi che i visitatori lasciano sui visitors book. L'intento dello studio è l'uso dei commenti dei visitatori per migliorare il servizio offerto dal museo.

Parole chiave:

museo, visitors book, gestione.

INTRODUCTION

Museums are complex sites where conservation, research, and didactic proposals are supplemented with cultural, social, and amusing aspects, so that visitors may experience intellectual, emotional and spiritual growth (Packer, 2008; Pekarik, 2008; 2010). As a consequence, the comprehension of visitors' perceptions represents an increasingly complex task, dealing with different fields of study. The evaluation of the efficacy of museum communication must consider the comprehension of "how" visitors perceive the exhibits, "why" they visit a museum, and what are their expectations and satisfaction during or after the visit.

Visitors studies are addressed to evaluate exhibits

(Serrel, 2006; Pekarik, 2010), didactic activities and communication (Simone, 2007; Pace et al., 2008), social and behavioral aspects (Andreotti & Ghiozzi, 1999; Mazzolini, 2002), offered services, and visitors' expectations (Fasol, 2002; Merzagora & Rodari, 2007). The methods used to obtain indications from visitors range from questionnaires to interviews, focus groups, phone or web surveys, and checks of behavior during the visit (Binks & Uzzel, 1994). The study of visitor behavior during his/her permanence in a museum raises problems of privacy violation, and it is not completely explicative of his/her opinion about exhibits. Whereas the other methods, although in different ways, require contact with an operator perceived as

a representative of the museum affecting the choice of arguments, the way in which the questions are submitted, and the sincerity of the answers.

The visitors' book is a non-mediated tool that hosts free indications on visitors' opinions. It is ubiquitous in museums and temporary exhibitions, up to the point that MacDonald (2005) considered it an integral part of the exhibit: "visitors re-enter the museological process: they move from being the end-point or 'receivers' of the 'museum messages' to being part of the process through which museum exhibitions are created".

In the past, visitors' books documented the visit of famous and important persons testifying the reputation and importance of the museum (Findlen, 1994). In modern times, the comments on visitors books are considered appreciative responses given out from guests to their hosts (Katriel, 1997), often written to leave something of him/herself in the museum, and not to remark upon the visit.

This aspect of the visitors books grew by itself due to the fact that "Visitors clearly appreciated "talking back" to the museum" (Alexander, 2000). Alexander (2000) was also attracted by sharp, articulated, sophisticated and sometimes vehement comments, even devoted towards the book itself: "These comment books are excellent, they open communication, encourage internal analysis of materials and offer an outlet for expression. WONDERFUL". Pekarik (1997) analyzed comment forms for Flight Time Barbie exhibition at the National Air and Space Museum (NASM), but the comments didn't spontaneous, like in a free visitors book, because "a comment form was printed and bound as a tear-off pad".

Visitors books are free spaces where visitors can express what they think in regards to, but not limited to, the just visited museum. Visitors books have been the object of descriptive studies (Morris, 2011) but analytical studies on them are lacking.

Although the book is a precious, non-operator-mediated source of suggestions, the freedom of expression of comments creates many pigeonholing difficulties. References to the authors of the comments are occasional, and it is therefore impossible to study the correlation of comments with the age, the social status, or the cultural level of the visitors, as is usually done with the operator-mediated canonical investigation.

Since visitors write on arguments that they consider as important in relation with the museum visit, providing precious inputs that must be extracted from visitors books.

The Marine Biology Museum (MBM) "Pietro Parenzan" of the University of Salento exhibits about 900 items of marine fauna related to 690 species, in a small town (Porto Cesareo, about 4500 inhabitants). The MBM was founded in 1966 and, in

the period 2004-2010, it was visited by an average of 11,000 visitors per year. Part of the visitors were involved in studies that evaluated divulgation aspects (Muscogiuri & Belmonte, 2007), science learning (Miglietta et al., 2008), exhibition preparation (Miglietta et al., 2005; Posi et al., 2010), and cultural mediation aspects (Pace et al., 2008).

The aims of the present study are:

- to propose a conceptual key for the interpretation of visitors book messages
- to understand if visitors opinions written on visitors book can help for museum management.

METHODS

MBM visitors freely wrote opinions and comments on visitors book during approximately six years (July 2004 - March 2010). Previous studies, and the analysis of the visitors books showed that they were of different ages and social positions, both sexes, and came from different geographic areas (either Italian or European). The Museum, in fact, is open all the year round and Porto Cesareo is a tourist summer place, which hosts a school-based tourism during winter - spring.

MacDonald (2005) defined two categories for visitors book comments: "short evaluative comments" and "longer reflective comments", but it was impossible to subdivide our data in these two categories because of the vast variety of their forms and lengths.

The collected data were thus assigned to various categories that were already defined in other museum studies not dealing with visitors books (Bitner, 1992; Kaplan, 1995; Pekarik et al., 1999; MacDonald, 2005; Packer, 2008) (tab. 1).

RESULTS

Many analyzed comments (messages), even if written by a single visitor, contained more than one opinion, and were consequently assignable to more than one category. The 1,480 analyzed messages, thus, reported 2,195 opinions

All the 2,195 analyzed opinions were subdivided in 4 conceptual categories (representing 91,89% of the total opinions) and an "others" category (8,11% of the total opinions) (tab. 1).

1) Satisfying experience due to cognitive aspects (sensu Pekarik et al., 1999)

A total of 609 opinions (27,74%) were referred to this category (tab. 2).

Some visitors communicated what they learned or enrichment of what they already knew. Others communicated change of opinions, or referred to the preparation of the visit.

Some opinions in which visitors advise to improve some of the labels considered unreadable are a

	sensu	n°	%
Satisfying experience due to cognitive aspects	Pekarik, 1999	609	27,74
Restorative environment	Kaplan, 1995	518	23,60
Satisfying experience due to objects	Pekarik, 1999	498	22,69
Setting attributes	Bitner, 1992	392	17,86
others			
Thanks and congratulations	autors of this study and MacDonald, 2005	92	4,19
Psychological/subjective/introspective perceptions	Packer, 2008 and Pekarik, 1999	67	3,05
Social aspects	Pekarik, 1999	15	0,68
References to other museums visited	autors of this study	4	0,18
	tot.	2195	100,00

Tab. 1. Number of opinions subdivided in conceptual categories.

demand for further knowledge. The cognitive aspect of the visit moreover seems deeply linked to the guide. Many opinions, in fact, expressed appreciation for those who take the visitor through the halls and explain the collections, translating complex concepts while adapting own language to the level of the listeners and helping them to comprehend what they see. Comments about guides are 86 in total. Of these, 30 dealt with the guide's behavior, character and way of addressing the public, the majority stressing the guide's preparation.

2) Restorative Environments (sensu Kaplan, 1995)

A total of 518 opinions (23,60%) were referred to this category (tab. 2). Many visitors made comments about how "fascinating", "beautiful", and "exciting" the museum is, and how wonderful the experience they had at the museum was. The comments reflecting a sensation of involvement, amazement, and fascination were numerous. To some visitors the museum was like a trip under the sea. According to Kaplan (1995) even a relatively small area can provide a sense of expansion.

The compatibility of the arguments exposed and proposed about the museum is stressed by someone's comment.

3) Satisfying Experience linked to objects (sensu Pekarik et al., 1999)

A total of 498 opinions (22,69%) were referred to this category (tab. 2). Sentences like "The thing I liked the most..." or "The thing I preferred is..." are practically on every page of the visitors book. Visitors especially liked real-life looking animals. Some asked for more specimens and, among the signaled specimens, the big, spectacular, rare, unusual ones appear at the top positions. Some imaginative suggestions referred to the most interesting specimens. Some visitors instead made

undesirable comments about the stuffed animals or those in formaldehyde (they often wrote that it would be better if they were alive). Many opinions were not referred to single specimens, neither about the museum as a whole, but about two halls, the basking shark hall and the fisheries hall. In these halls no original collection's specimens are exposed but, instead, recently-made (2000-2010) resin models; the exhibit abandoned the taxonomic criterion in favor of set design and colors, in order to simulate an underwater scenario.

4) Setting Attributes (sensu Bitner, 1992)

A total of 392 opinions (17,86%) were referred to this category (tab. 2). Opinions that referred to the museum's "ambient" were 102. Comments about the structure showed that the care taken, the tidiness and the good organization were appreciated, but the small size of the building was noted. With regard to this last note, an enlargement of the museum space was suggested. Some visitors also complained about excessively high or low temperatures and about functionality (171 opinions reported as insufficient the road signals leading to the museum). The need to improve the publicity of the museum was also present in comments. Some remarks regarded the lack of "hands-on" activities and the lack of translations. The free entrance and guided visits received discordant opinions: some appreciated this aspect, others instead retained that a ticket should be paid. These opposed positions were quantitatively equivalent. The museum's opening times, comprising also Sundays, was positively commented. Some suggested changing the soundtrack of documentaries. Though the museum is very small, a comment advised to indicate a visit route. Concerning design and didactical supports, several visitors commented positively on the exhibit preparation. Among the opinions about didactical

Category	% on the total opinions	Sub-category	Example
Satisfying experience due to cognitive aspects	27.74%	Learning aspects	Today I can define myself as having been very informed about sharks...
		Enrichment aspects	It enriched me a lot...
		Change of opinions	I didn't know that one could derive so many products from sharks...
		Preparation for the visit	I'd liked to come to the museum more prepared...
		Guide	Without the guide it would have been much less interesting...
Restorative Environments	23.60%	Fascination	All children liked the gigantic animal, they were fascinated and the memory will remain with them forever...
		Being away	I'm not a free diver, but today I felt myself underwater..!
		Sense of expansion	I have been "submerged" by this museum...
		oment and one's inclinations.	This experience has confirmed my passion for nature. Next year I'll apply to a study program in Natural Sciences...
Satisfying experience linked to objects	22.69%	Suggestions	You should display a living specimen of a giant squid...
		Rare things	You should showcase never seen before species...
		Big things	The turtle was gigantic!
		Never seen things	I have never seen such incredible fish..!
		Important things	It is necessary to enhance the most important animals with suitable spaces and contours...
		Stuffed animals	I was saddened to see the dolphin in formaldehyde
Setting attributes	17.86%	Temperature problems	A bit less air conditioning perhaps..?
		Street signals	Very interesting museum, but reach it is a problem...
		Lack of "hands-on"	Let the visitor touch the items...
		Lack of translations	A translation system for foreign tourists is missing...
		Free entrance and free guided visits	Resist with this free entrance... / Make visitors pay at least 10 €...
		Festive opening	Very good Sunday's afternoon opening, not a usual thing...
		Soundtrack of documentaries	Happier music as film's audio...
		Visit route	It would be preferable that there was a route to visit...
		Didactical supports and exhibit preparation	Panels are very useful... / Each comment is simple and of easy understanding...
		Staff	The staff were very kind, they let us to look the movie even though it was late...

Tab. 2. Examples of opinions assigned to categories and sub-categories.

supports, many are referred to films. One documents the two local Marine Protected Areas' habitats and was entirely shot underwater, music being the only audio support: many visitors asked for vocal comments. Many opinions regarded the staff (99), judging both their behavior, preparation and competence.

"Others" category (tab. 3)

Giving thanks and congratulations

The public's written "thanks" and "congratulations" are in total 92 (4,19%).

Visitors addressed their messages to the people who take care of the MBM or to the craftsmen of some models. No examples of direct addressing to the rest

Category	% on the total opinions	Sub-category	Example
Giving thanks and congratulations	4.19%	To the people who take care of the MBM	Congratulations for the care and the passion of those who prepared and manage this museum...
		To the craftsmen of some models	Congratulations to the artist who built the lantern fish...
Psychological/ Subjective/ Introspective Perceptions	3.05%	Personal enrichment	Thank you for the opportunity to enrich our holidays with some culture...
		Value for daily life	It is interesting to know better even the fish that we eat every day...
		Help to find our own identity	one day I'll be a marine biologist myself...
		Relations among generations	I hope to bring my family with me next time...
		Introspective experience	The museum is of use to understand what we're losing if we don't stop...
		Recreation	Thanks for having given us this afternoon filled with wonder...
		Spiritual connection with God	Thanks my God for creation! What bounty of richness the sea!
		Fideism	We always re-visit this museum with increasing pleasure...
		Memories	It's been 13 years since I've been missing this place, the old custodian was a great friend and I grew up here. It is wonderful to re-live some old memories.
		Taking away something	a souvenir?
Social aspects	0.68%	Children	I'm a sciences teacher, it has been very exciting to take with me my 5 years old child visiting this fantastic museum...
		Friends	I'm here in Porto Cesareo with my best friend
References to other museums visited	0.18%		In we visited this same type of museum, there it was highly advertised, but disappointing and expensive

Tab. 3. Examples of opinions assigned to categories and sub-categories.

of the public were found, as MacDonald (2005) reported in his study.

Psychological/Subjective/Introspective Perceptions (sensu Packer, 2008; Pekarik et al., 1999)

67 opinions (3,05%) were referred to this category. Visit inspired sensations of personal wellbeing for different reasons. According to Packer (2008) the comments could be related to personal enrichment, value for daily life as a help to find our own identity. Also the visit creates positive relations among generations.

In 53 opinions visitors declared to have lived an introspective experience (Pekarik et al., 1999), for example thinking about nature conservation or recreation. To some visitor, the visit determined a spiritual connection with God, for others it inspired a sense of membership that often leads to a fideism: the will of coming back, for as much as obtained by written opinions, is based on one hand on the perception of not having had the opportunity to see

everything, on the other hand on the certainty that new things will be found in future visits. Some visitors referred to their memories, one even wrote about own childhood.

Probably to the mechanism of "remembering" is also linked to the need for taking away something as a souvenir of the visit: postcards, disks, or other objects.

Social aspects (sensu Pekarik et al., 1999)

Only 15 opinions (0,68%) were referred to this category. Social aspects are often referred to children accompanied to the museum.

References to other museums visited

In very few cases (0,18%) a comparison with similar structures was proposed.

Visitors experiences can be described quantitatively and qualitatively in a "Museum Opinions Chart" (MOC) to be regularly updated to reveal the changes in visitors opinions in relation to museum

life (temporary exhibitions, opening of new exhibitions, shift in management of the museum) (tab. 1).

DISCUSSION

The analysis of the comments highlight the heterogeneity of the museum visitors and, in some cases, provided useful suggestions for the management of the museum.

With regards to the learning process, some visitors comments referred to the need of preliminary preparation about what will be seen in the museum, so as to increase the effectiveness of the acquired knowledge (Roschelle, 1995; Hein, 1998). The didactic activity carried out in the MBM is largely addressed to young people (Muscogiuri & Belmonte, 2007), and this attention for the youngsters was perceived and appreciated in the simplicity/clarity of the explicative panels (Pace et al., 2008). The effectiveness of the visit to the MBM was also sustained by the presence of accompanying persons (guides).

Guides are usually judged based on their competence about a specific subject, but many comments referred to their character and behavior. Hence, it is important to welcome visitors in a friendly manner, and talk to them as soon as they enter the museum. The visitors distinguished the two figures they interacted with into the museum, one welcoming them in the building and the other guiding them through the exhibits, commenting the behavior of the staff room and the preparation of the guide. In addition, the courteous manner in which the visitors are treated is always appreciated.

The suggestions from this point may be:

- to supply materials for museum visit preparation (particularly to teachers)

- to reinforce the guide presence in museum
- to take particular care in staff recruitment, with attention to character aspects as well as professionalism.

Some visitors declared that “museum was like a trip under the sea”, we think this comment was relative to the blue halls in which was abandoned the taxonomic criterion in order to simulate an underwater scenario. We feel encouraged to adopt the same design choice in the next exhibitions.

Museums have didactical, educational, and recreational roles (Packer, 2008; Pekarik, 2010), with a social dimension too, and some opinions, in fact, noticed a familiar atmosphere created during the visit. Many are the references to children brought by their parents to visit the museum. Parents use the indications to teach their children, they read the texts and comment with the text echo technique (McManus, 1989; Leinhardt & Knuston, 2004).

The suggestions we could obtain from this point may be:

- pay major attention to the children exigences, for example in considering their attention time length.
- Objects remain a central feature of naturalistic museums. The term “museum” is often referred to institutions with no objects in display. True museums exist where valuable objects exist, and the actual difference established by this existence deals with the story of each object. It is through the objects that spiritual and knowledge contents pass (Lugli et al., 2004). Moreover, in scientific museums objects are used to explain concepts (Pesarini, 1997) and are the intimate union that is created between the collections and the public which constitutes the museum (Cipriani, 2006).

The presence in the MBM of both true specimens or

Category		Suggestions	
Satisfying experience due to cognitive aspects	To supply materials for museum visit preparation (particularly to teachers)	To reinforce the guide presence in museum and to take particular care in staff recruitment, with attention to character aspects as well as professionalism	To tell, were possible, the history of the objects
Restorative Environments	To choose spectacular way for the next exhibitions	To give the right emphasis to big and fascinating objects	
Satisfying Experience linked to objects	To take in considerations visitors appreciation of rare and real things	To take in consideration the spectacular side of things in preparing new exhibitions	
Setting Attributes	To improve written texts in labels and panels	To improve street signals	To translate, were possible, written text in english
Social aspects	To pay major attention to the children exigences, for example in considering their attention time length		

Tab. 4. Visitors suggestions for museum management.

models is also the object of contrasting opinions, also through questions to the museum operators. Nowadays, the introduction of real specimens in the MBM is linked with exceptional and accidental captures by local fishermen but, in general, models are retained as more effective than true, stuffed specimens. Well-done models attract visitors, even if some of them expressed disappointment while learning that what they saw were models and not true specimens but, in general, the success of the exposed models was evident. All models are exposed in two halls and 28 visitors judged them the most attractive of the museum's halls. There, the exhibition of true specimens was avoided, as was also any taxonomic expositive criterion, the number of exposed objects was reduced (with the extreme of the basking shark hall dedicated to a single model of large size) in favor of the "spectacular design" technique (Counts, 2009: "Spectacular Design can help those exhibitions that are intended to immerse audiences into a story, give them the opportunity to witness a different world...").

The suggestions we could obtain from this point may be:

- to take in considerations visitors appreciation of rare and real things
- to take in consideration the spectacular side of things in preparing new exhibitions

The perception of an object depends, other than on its qualities, also on the quality of the context in which it is inserted (Bartoli, 1996). The MBM visitors carefully judged the space, stressing the small size of the exhibition area (a surface of about 250 m²) and hoping for a future increase.

The free entrance played a role in encouraging visits, and Perin (2007) already wondered if the small advantage deriving from a small ticket-entry fee produces the decrease in the number of visitors access (and their subtraction to the divulgation purposes of the museum).

The suggestions we could obtain from this point may be:

- further improvement written texts in labels and panels
- to improve street signals to the museum
- to enlarge the exhibits
- to translate, were possible, written text in english

The suggestions that we consider effective to improve MBM management are summarized in table 4.

CONCLUSIONS

MBM hosted about 60,000 visitors during the 6 studied years, and 1,480 of them (2.5%) left a message: its clear that opinions of such a small number of visitors do not represent the totality of visitors. But we think that is important to take them into account because visitors who feel strongly

about their experience in a museum generally welcome the opportunity to make their feelings known to the staff (Pekarik, 1997) and therefore its appropriate to consider them.

Visitors spontaneously individuated problems and suggested solutions, without any driving by museum operators. Those who write on visitors books often aim at communicating positive messages, such as thanks, kind suggestions, or compliments. This represents a big limit to the use of visitors books as evaluation tools. But even if nearly always positive, opinions can be important to understand visitors points of view about all museum aspects and contribute to understand what visitors asked to or expected from the museum they just visited.

The visitors book is the mirror of the complexity of the public, and the necessity to interpret visitors perceptions and expectations remains useful to improve the efficacy of the museum.

MOC data could represent a start basis to adopt improvement strategies, for example an exit questionnaire (or a structured visitors book) specifically organized according the opinion categories, to study their evolution with time, and consequently tune decisions about the MBM management.

The results obtained are already being used to improve our museum so as to maintain a link with visitors opinions.

We think the visitors book cannot be an assessment tool, but an information tool for museum management.

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