

Mobile technology - What you really, really want

Mobile technology offers immense opportunities for museums, art galleries, zoos and many other informal learning organisations. Potentially it could provide individually tailored interpretation for each visitor in the language, format and organisation of their choice as well as providing opportunities for visitors to contribute their own content, capture information for later retrieval and even to interact with other visitors with similar interests. But I am a little concerned that so far the development of mobile technology for museums has mainly been driven by the supply side (what could be done) with relatively little contribution from the demand side – the institutions that will be commissioning the technology.

So what might be going through the mind of a museum manager when they are offered a new mobile technology for their visitors?

1. The technology must be cheap and easy to hand out, collect and maintain. This is often overlooked yet it is the one thing which above all else could prevent effective implementation. If it requires a museum to employ four extra members of staff simply to do this it is unlikely that they are going to be willing cover the costs. The museum could of course charge for the hire of this equipment but there has to be a guarantee that the demand is strong enough and that this does not cannibalise the market for other more profitable products such as tickets for temporary exhibitions, guide books or IMAX films. Could we use the technology that visitors already have – their mobile phones, PDA's and iPods?
2. Any mobile technology and its accompanying software must be simple and intuitive to use. I am not going to want a system that requires visitors to go through a half hour tutorial or a lengthy demonstration especially if that has to occur at the ticket desk.
3. Objects move, old galleries closed and new ones open. Content must be easy and quick to update by staff who are not specialists in digital technology.
4. It must enhance visitors' experience. No matter how wonderful the technology it must not distract attention away from the exhibits nor disrupt social interaction between visitors. This social interaction is a key motivation for people to come to museums and facilitates much of their learning, especially within family groups. Head-phones are distinctly problematic so how will the technology overcome this?
5. I want a system that allows visitors to plan their visit and to be given clear instructions as to how to get to where they want to go. I also want the system to provide suggestions, prompts and (pleasant) surprises as well as basic information like the location of toilets and the shop.

6. I want visitors to be able to delve deeply into the rich resource of information about the objects. I want this data base of information to be easy to search so that visitors can quickly see what is available and find things which will intrigue them. I want visitors to be able to interrogate each object to be able to find out not only what it is but where it comes from, who made it, how it works, why it is on display, how it got here and so on. All of this of course needs to be under the control of the visitor. And I want this information provided in different formats – film, photographs, computer animations, sound, and text – but not as a distraction from the real objects.

7. I want to provide a much better service to visitors who speak English as a second language or who speak no English at all. But remember all the information in other languages must be easy to update by my staff.

8. I also really want to exploit the new possibilities that mobile technology offers rather than simply having a model version of a computer database. I want this technology to allow visitors to become active learners rather than merely passive receivers of information. I want visitors to actively contribute to the interpretation of an exhibition by providing their own interpretation of the objects, leaving behind their thoughts, feelings, reminiscences, questions and ideas for others to read.

9. Finally I want people to be able to extend the experience beyond the actual visit by capturing elements of the experience to review back at home or in school. These might be images, information, suggestions for further reading or places to visit. And I want this experience to dovetail perfectly with what is offered on the museum's web site.

10. And of course whatever is provided must be compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act.

That is what I really, really want.