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NatSCA News

Title: A Tale of 2 Standpoints

Author(s): Hallaway, A.

Source: Hallaway, A. (2006). A Tale of 2 Standpoints. *NatSCA News, Issue 9*, 46 - 48.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/256>

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A Tale of 2 Standpoints - Andrea Hallaway

At this year's NatSCA annual meeting in Liverpool a difference of opinion occurred. Emma Freeman had just finished her presentation entitled 'Darwin Centre and beyond: access to collections and access to ideas at the Natural History Museum' and it was question time. William Lindsay (Royal College of Art / V&A Conservation) asked with no hesitation,

"But why Alton Towers?"

He was referring to Emma's identification of Alton Towers as being among the key attractions with which the museum considers itself in competition. Special exhibitions are a vehicle to bring visitors in and support the permanent displays, but are often criticised for being sensationalist, over-simplistic and sometimes inaccurate, with too much of an emphasis being placed on generating revenue. A back and forth confrontation ensued with William making the valid point that the museum was a very different place to Alton Towers, with different aims and values, so why should it put itself in the same competition boat? Emma's response was that whether we like it or not, surveys have shown that families looking for a day out may well choose either a museum or a theme park.

Unfortunately this matter went unresolved due to time concerns. But I couldn't stop thinking about this conflict of opinion. I have worked in both Public Engagement Group and Science at the Natural History Museum, and whilst a part of me wants to stay true to the traditional and ideological values of our scientific institution, which believes in scientific educational entertainment for its audience, I also appreciated the need to acquire funding to achieve this noble status. If the reality of this means competing with a non-educational theme park in order to entice our audience for their own benefit then so be it....It could be argued, however, that if we were willing to compete with, and therefore try to create theme park type exhibitions (high entertainment value but low/no educational value) just to generate money, at what point would we have to kiss goodbye to our proud and much coveted reputation as being one of the leading natural history museums in the world? If we kept doing what some would consider low quality special exhibitions designed only for high visitor numbers, we would also run the risk of becoming known only for these.

But on the flip side of the coin, it's not like these special exhibitions are pure trash; in fact they are exhibitions put together with the utmost of interpretive care, with strict and well considered learning outcomes just like the permanent exhibitions. The only difference is that the special exhibitions have to be a (pregnant pause in preparation for this most unpopular phrase...) *Block Buster*. It has to make money for the museum and therefore topics are chosen largely for their popular appeal rather than more ambitious, in depth subjects that may be chosen for permanent displays. The thinking is that permanent exhibitions might aim to encourage people into learning or experiencing something they didn't necessarily realise they wanted to know. Special exhibitions topics are chosen with the intention of having guaranteed instant popular appeal.

Anyway, all this was just my (rather extensive) initial thoughts on the matter. I seemed unable to budge from the middle of a rather uncomfortable fence and commit to one side of the argument or the other. I needed to do more solid investigation work to really understand this issue, and where better to start than on the internet. I wanted to find out whether we really did compete with the likes of Alton Towers for family days out, so I typed '*days out families*' into Google. Sure enough, on the first site I was presented with, Alton Towers was highlighted in all its eye-catching glory. One click away, under *Southeast England inc. London* and the 5th on the list was our very own *Natural History Museum*, and then in brackets just to avoid any confusion...*(the one with all the dinosaurs)*. So, from this initial exploration I think I can safely assume that the Natural History Museum does seem to be in competition with other non-educational attractions across the country.

Then I looked up the mission statements of both places in question; The aim of The Tussauds Group, which owns several large theme parks including Alton towers, is '*to dazzle visitors with the most captivating city centre attractions in the world and the most diverse and exciting portfolio of theme parks in Europe*'.

The Natural History Museum's vision reads;

We are one of the leading natural history museums in the world. Our ambition is to be recognized as the world leader. We aim to share our knowledge, engage people's curiosity and encourage both their enjoyment of the present and responsibility for the future of our planet.

It was clearly time to speak to the persons involved so I arranged to meet William. William is concerned with authenticity in museum exhibitions. By this he means to question the truth of the exhibition's content and how much the museum should interpret evidence within them. For example he wonders what experience visitors are supposed to be getting from a dinosaur exhibition. Dinosaurs are fossils and they are extinct so why are we, the Natural History Museum, trying to recreate them with animatronics when we don't actually know what they looked like? If the reason is purely to attract and entertain families with children, with no consideration towards educational value, it is frighteningly similar to the aims of Alton Towers.

And how does our museum define of success anyway? Looking back at the museum (he used to work here) William recognised a cultural shift imposed on staff with the introduction of an admission charge in the early 1990's. A product now had to be marketed because of the charge, and visitors were now customers and had to be treated with more care and as a result were perceived differently. Although the museum is now free again, those values of seeing the visitor as the customer seem to have stuck. We still appear to be obsessed with visitor numbers and increasing them, even when, particularly in school holiday time, the galleries become uncomfortably packed. What is the museum's ethos now to its public, as it seems that numbers = success = value. Is this really a good measure of success? For example is it deemed a triumph if another crowded special exhibition about dinosaurs pulls in the target amount of people and therefore money, even though the visitors may have experienced little or no satisfaction from the content and environment?

William also questioned why the museum wants to promote itself as a theme park when clearly it is not? And why do different principles appear to apply to different areas of the museum, for example permanent exhibitions aiming to adhere to the museums vision, whereas the purpose of the special exhibitions is to make as much money as possible. What's more, if we keep doing exhibitions on dinosaurs are we not in danger of appearing to have run out of other ideas? At what point do we stop compromising? The museum needs to be unique and true to its vision, even when forced to compete for visitors.

Another point that came up in our discussion was; when is the decision made by the visitor of where to go? The night before: the week before: after a good solid bit of researching or possibly on a friend's recommendation? And why does it not appear to be as simple as going to one place for entertainment and another for education? Finally, William suspects that the museum aim got distorted when money and visitor numbers became the driver to communicate with the public, rather than a good visitor experience and proven learning outcomes. It was time I went to talk to Emma on the subject and get some answers to these questions.

The museum wants to strengthen its position as one of the UK's top visitor attractions. We recognise that there are many different pulls on people's leisure time, the museum is just one of them so we want to make sure we are just as attractive or more so, than their other options for a day out. At £8 per visitor, special exhibitions need to be well worth the value and provide an excellent day out. In order to do that we are looking at research that shows many visitors come to the museum for an entertaining day out with their friends or families, as well as to find out something new. We can learn from other leisure industries such as theme parks, in order to use entertainment as a hook. Emma feels that making a distinction between entertainment and education is false.

Since going free the museum attracts double the amount of visitors, so we are keenly aware that we need to provide more for them to do, and we have needed to increase our revenue to cope with this since the government does not pay for it. And lets not forget that these paying exhibitions are a major source of funding for projects such as Darwin Centre 2. Emma is also keen to point out the benefits and opportunities of special exhibitions. They allow us to outreach valuable science knowledge and museum collections. As a result other institutions (museums, science centres etc.) are interested in this exhibition for their outreach programmes. For example a special exhibition currently being worked on called 'Antarctica' is now endorsed as an 'International Polar Year' project.

I asked Emma if she thought doing another dinosaur exhibition would eventually 'dumb down' the image of the museum, or run the risk of becoming known for one topic only. She said that the decision to do a dino-

saur exhibition every three or so years partly came about because the theme is so popular it is an almost guaranteed success and meets our business objectives. But to create a new and exciting exhibition with fresh new objects, experiences and inspirations on a tried and tested subject is quite a challenge. What they allow us to do is experiment with new ideas, technologies and experiences in order to reach visitors increasingly sophisticated demands from us. This is the life work of the NHM scientists involved in these exhibitions, and more importantly these exhibitions still get the process of science across. Also, here have been many other successful special exhibition themes in the past few years including 'Voyages of Discovery', 'Diamonds', 'Antarctica' etc.

The museum is getting much better at using market research to inform topics for special exhibitions. A fairly new process is in place for deciding new special exhibition themes: a forum on the museum intranet where staff can make suggestions. From this the front runners are tested in market research and feasibility studies. So it does seem that employees have direct influence over subject matter, and maybe we can look forward to being more experimental with special exhibition topics, pushing boundaries and trying new technologies. I asked Emma if there was any method in place to stop special exhibitions becoming so crowded that it becomes a poor experience. She said that regarding the newly opened Dino-Jaws, it has been designed to have a 40 minute dwell time, which is optimal in a content rich, hands on exhibition.

A new strategy for the museum called the 'virtuous circle', aims to extend the visitor experience beyond the museum visit. We aim for the visitor journey to start and end with the website – this will allow visitors to plan their visit so they can explore, experience and learn at the museum (getting hands on, experiencing the collections, perhaps meeting scientists) then return to the website to explore in more detail. The idea is that the museum is the inspiration point. The web allows for more self-directed, thorough learning. If visitors have a good time in special exhibitions they may come back to see the permanent exhibitions and have a more in depth experience. In view of this there is a real effort to link special exhibitions with the permanent galleries.

So what is my conclusion to all this?

I think that yes, the museum ought to maintain its authenticity and integrity in special and permanent exhibitions alike. But how far do we take this authenticity? Strictly speaking we don't know what dinosaurs looked like, but we have evidence to suggest how they might have been and animatronics is the key to firing people's imaginations, arousing their curiosity and finding out more. However, I do think there is a danger of losing integrity in special exhibitions if the emphasis is placed too heavily on the necessity to be a block buster.

I do believe that the team involved with interpreting special exhibitions aim to ensure that visitors are provided with a fulfilling and rich experience, although sometimes I think this can be a challenge when faced with similar topics year on year. I also have concerns about the achievability of the virtuous circle strategy. I think it's a great idea and a great resource but is it not a bit unrealistic to think that even half of our visitors will complete the circle? We have already identified that many of our target audience visit us for fairly superficial reasons like a fun, social day out, and I think it highly unlikely that this will change much, without a drastic increase in outreach work and advertising in order to get people aware of the website (the beginning of the process) in the first place.

As for the Alton Towers thing that started off this whole affair. Well, I would like to believe that people come to the Natural History Museum in order to feel stimulated, to learn about the process of science and our science, to experience something new etc. I would like their reasons for choosing to go to Alton Towers to be different and for the two places not come into the same category. But this is what I feel and the distinctions I make. I love museums and I have a strong interest in science, I do not have a young family and I do not, at the moment, consider Alton Towers a particularly satisfying or value for money day out. But if market research shows that we are competing with theme parks for visitors then that is a fact. It doesn't mean to say that we are turning into one just because we entice our visitors in by the promise of scaring young children with moving dinosaurs.