

Getting on board the Value train



This article is from a presentation I shared with the wonderful folk from Interpretation Network New Zealand ... always an inspiration being around such talented people. The following link is to the article on the INNZ website:

<http://www.innz.net.nz/getting-on-board-the-value-train-john-pastorelli>

Value ... a subjective perspective

Value is such a subjective notion determined by so many variables. What may be of value to some people might cause others to cringe. What rocks people's world one day might be discarded the next. For example, I'm writing this article whilst listening to a band called the Groove Investigators, whose genre I'd say is somewhere around funky jazz. I bought their album late last year and played it quite consistently for a few weeks till I 'moved on' ... relationship over. But only a few weeks ago I've gone back to being a groupie, loving their music and playing it on a daily basis.

As interpreters we live in the world of value. We identify and articulate value, we develop the opportunities for our audience to access and connect to value, and we facilitate the experiences where people can engage and be inspired by value ... so that they can value. When applied to context this value might be focused on the significance of a historic and / or cultural site, the importance of conserving areas of wilderness, or perhaps preserving and continuing the legacy of story such as that of a person and/or culture.

As a collective of individuals interpreters value 'stuff' and I don't use stuff in any derogatory sense but as a way to capture in one word the incredibly diverse array of stories, places, artefacts, attractions, events, animals and areas that interpreters value and want to share with others. In the main I believe that as interpreters we feel that we are making a difference to this planet in ways that seek to better the lives of people, guarantee the sustainability of biota and enrich the culture of society ... and wouldn't it be nice to get a few more people on board. To do this we need to inspire these same people to value this big collection of stuff as well.

Sharing value

One of the many challenges in seeking to share all this stuff is not just the actual process of sharing but determining how and what to share. What message? What story? What perspective? To who? What aspect of value do we share as interpreters?

Another challenge is that we sometimes have to let go of the way in which we value and want to share something, and get relevant to how other people value something. To step into the world of metaphor, we have to shift the currency we are using.

A very simple example is when we have to argue the case for interpretation within a discretionary budget framework and to financially orientated decision makers who love numbers. Let's say you have this amazing area that communicates the story of the widget-tailed dancing ant. The fact that people are finding this animal fascinating might be wonderful in an interpreter's world but it's unlikely to be of value in a number crunching world. We try and argue the case that so many people find this story fascinating and that we want to keep the experience free so that more people can be amazed by this remarkable animal and contribute toward its survival. But if we are to be sustainable during budget crunches we need to think of how we can develop a value perspective that matters in this number crunching world. Perhaps it means that you need to create a tourism trail that will attract an extra thousand people paying so many dollars and by so doing using the currency of numbers to create a tune that entices financial ears.

I am often faced with the need to justify an investment in interpretation and to respond to the question 'what evidence do you have that it benefits the bottom line'? We intuitively know that interpretation makes a difference to people's positive experience of stuff but it's hard to drag out empirical evidence to demonstrate a direct benefit to the bottom line (there are increasing case studies being shared which add some cred to the financial benefit of interpretation). What frustrates

me at times is that I have to argue the obvious ... but I also have to remember that what might be obvious to me is not to others.

I'm often faced with this same challenge of shifting perspectives when I'm in the world of marketing. With the latter we are essentially asking someone to part with a currency and move from 'where they are' to a place where currently 'they are not' – the motivation to move might relate to aspirations because it offers a 'better place' or it could be pain related motivation because of the need to move from a 'place that stinks'. Within this world of marketing we pitch ourselves in a manner that is relevant to our market. This is not prostituting ourselves to the market but rather increasing our potential to be influential ... and there is a big difference between the two. A key principle within an interpreter's world is to communicate in ways that are relevant to our intended audience.

Being flexible whilst maintaining integrity

And with the latter yet another challenge presents itself – how to have the flexibility to interpret 'another value' without losing the integrity of the story. In the end I believe we have to keep this integrity because it is the authentic which visitors seek to experience. It is the non-template form of an experience that provides the point of difference. Even 2 identical houses side by side will always have unique stories. And we can only push the scope of these unique stories so far before they lose their integrity and authenticity.

I believe that identifying our message before method or market is what gives us the flexibility to move toward achieving our interpretive goal. Related to message is purpose and again identifying purpose early in the piece also has the potential to give us increased flexibility (this was reinforced for me during a recent Interpretation Australia Google Hangout which focused – this discussion group featured keynotes that included Oli and Amy from Wellington Zoo).

The subject nature of value is what makes the quest of interpreters so fascinating, exciting and challenging. We have to find the essence of story and the authentic layer that preserves integrity, we have to develop the flexibility of how best to communicate this so that is relevant to visitors ... and we have to find ways of communicating value to an increased audience of people who can support us in this quest.