

# Interpretive Planning for the Next Millennium

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planning" and the "experience economy".



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worked for you two years ago, but will soon be out-of-date!*



***By Crispian Emberson & Dr John Veverka***

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*It's easy to come up with new ideas; the hard part is letting go of what worked for you two years ago, but will soon be out-of-date.*

When we do interpretive planning – what are we planning for? In the old days (a few years ago), most interpretive planning involved a simple process. When we were doing an interpretive master plan for a park or historic site for example, we looked at the resources or landscape, and the main interpretive message, and "planned" what interpretive services or media would go where to best illustrate the story. So interpretive planning was focused on two main elements: 1) the story or main interpretive theme/message; and then ultimately, 2) which media or service to employ at particular locations within site. Interpretive planning was more focused on the "place" than on the visitor.

## ***Objective based planning***

As our experiences with planning evolved we began to look at the outcomes from our interpretive planning efforts. What were we "really" accomplishing? So we began to employ "objectives" for all of our interpretive services and media: *learning, behavioral, and emotional objectives*. We began using these three levels of objective based interpretive planning not because it was just a good idea, but because our clients wanted some proof that the interpretive plans (the media and services) were actually working! For example, if you were going to pay thousands of dollars for interpretive panels, wouldn't you be interested in knowing if the visitors actually "got the message" from the panel?

It is hard to evaluate any interpretive program, service or media if you don't know "what it was supposed to accomplish" in the first place – that's where objectives come in. If an interpretive panel was designed to have "the majority of the visitors be able to describe the three ways trees benefit people", we could pre-test visitors to see if they knew the answers – and then post test visitors after they saw/read the interpretive panel to see if there was a real increase in knowledge. This level of interpretive planning then led us to a more advanced level of using objective based interpretive planning – cost per contact and cost effectiveness of the interpretive programs and services we recommend, design, and build. That means that our clients were not just interested in "did the visitors remember the information", they wanted to know if they (the organization, agency or facility) were getting a return on their interpretive media or service "investment". A new way thinking about interpretation. Now it was not just an information transfer that was the focus, but "what did we get in return for our investment of \$10,000.00 in interpretive panels"? Why should we spend money on interpretation if "nothing happens"? So we were now doing interpretive planning to predict just how cost effective each proposed interpretive program, service, or media might be. The key questions of the clients "if we spend \$1.00 on interpretation services or media, will we get at least \$1.00 in benefits from that media or service? In particular, we are now looking at interpretation results (from our learning, behavioral and emotional objectives) that can be demonstrated to:

- Benefit the resource (less litter, reduced vandalism, reduced erosion, etc.).
- Benefit the agency (visitors can identify the managing agency, understand their management strategies for the site, support the agency and its programs, etc.).
- Benefit the Visitors.

### ***Benefit based planning***

This new evolution had led us into new interpretive planning strategies where the most important of our objectives were now the behavioral and emotional objectives or "real outcomes". When interpretive planning begins for a project, we ask ourselves for every objective we develop for an interpretive program, exhibit, media or service:

1. **Why would a visitor want to know this?**
2. **How do you want the visitor to use the information you are giving them?**
3. **What are the benefits (to the resource, agency, visitor)?**

In other words, how will the visitors benefit from the interpretive program, media or service experience? And, is the cost of the experience (like a self-guiding tour) at least equal to the benefit package that is a product of the interpretation. So, just what are the benefits to the visitors, the resource, and the agency from spending \$5,000 or more to develop a self-guiding interpretive trail – or \$500,000.00 for visitor center exhibits? The sad point is that in the past – and even today, this is not often considered. But the question remains – if it was "your" money, would you spend thousands of dollars for interpretive "stuff" without first knowing what you got in return for that investment?

**The reality test** – go out and look at any interpretive media/services you may have at your site – exhibits, outdoor panel, self-guiding tour, etc. Now ask yourself – how is this particular media or service helping us accomplish our mission? Was it a good investment to spend \$2000.00 on an interpretive panel with information that the visitors likely quickly forget? How is this helping protect the resource, or instilling a sense of "value" to visitors, or helping the agency accomplish its educational or management objectives? Apply the questions to any of your media – from zoo signs, to historic sites, to parks. The answers you

## **The Product of the Product – and other messy ideas!**

I think of the "product of the product" concept as a "messy" idea because it is another evolutionary step for interpretive planning that messes up the way that "we've always done it". Here is how the concept works: By selling the "product" of the product we present the idea in a context that the potential visitor knows and understands. For example:

- **Are you selling drills – or holes?** Because if the customer doesn't need a hole, they don't need a drill. The "hole" is the product of the product (the drill).
- **Are you selling cosmetics – or hope?** Do the advertisements for both men's and women's cosmetics for example just sell the hair coloring gel – or what will happen to you after you use the product (feel younger, happier, more attractive).
- **Are you selling automobiles or "status"?** Watch a car ad on the television – who is driving the car – where are they driving the car to? What socio-income bracket is being marketed to? What is the "status" of the people in the advertisement?

Now let's apply this product of the product concept to interpretive planning :

- **What is the product of a self-guiding trail walk?**
- **What is the product of visitors reading your interpretive panels?**
- **What is the product of your visitor center exhibits?**
- **What is the product of your guided interpretive walks or tours?**

What is happening now is a new way of thinking about how to do interpretive planning. We clearly understand the outcome(s) we want to have happen (our objectives) **before** we plan and design the programs or services for a given site. We select locations, media, services, etc. to accomplish and realize the desired outcomes. We do not say "lets put a trail here, or a viewing station there" unless we know what the outcome (product) of that media or service has to be. Our desired product of the product helps form our learning, behavioral and emotional objectives that guide our research and design, and can be evaluated (pre and post tested) to see if we indeed get the "outcome or product" that we originally desired.

### **Now comes the "Experience Economy" – are we ready?**

The latest (very latest) formal addition to our interpretive planning philosophies is that of **experience based interpretive planning**. In their book "*The Experience Economy*", B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore looked at the value of "experiences" and experience as a marketable commodity. This concept translates very well to interpretive planning. Here is what experience based interpretive planning involves.

*When a person buys an experience, they pay to spend time enjoying a series of memorable events that a site or facility stages to engage them in a personal way. – Pine and Gilmore*

That means that we are not only just planning for outcomes (our objectives being accomplished at the end of an interpretive walk, or completing visiting a museum or visitor center exhibition), **we are now doing our interpretive planning for the total experience package.**

The total interpretive planning process must focus on the "experience package" a visitor receives from the total interpretive or heritage tourism site, region or facility – not just on individual interpretive experiences. For example, walking down a beautiful trail and seeing wildlife and wildflowers is just as important an "experience" for the visitor as the actual "interpretive" experience the self-guided trail offers. Here are some things we now consider in our "Experience Package" for interpretive planning:

- **We need to theme the total experience.** We have known this for a long time in interpretive planning – developing interpretive themes for sites, but it now receives even more importance in the total site "experience planning".
- **We need to try to harmonize impressions with positive cues.** In interpretive planning it is now even more important for the total site (restrooms, food service, and other support services) to support the theme in design and character.
- **We need to try to eliminate negative cues.** We do not want to take away from the theme or diminish the experience. That can range from litter pick-up to vista selection, to parking screening, and other design elements to keep the "best face" on the total site experience.
- **Mix in memorabilia.** This helps to extend the experience once the visitor has returned home. That adds greater importance on the design and stocking of gift shops, souvenir development (T-shirts, etc.), photo opportunities, and other memorable moment "planning". For example, when I worked as a seasonal interpreter at Ohio State

This might have been their first encounter with reptiles and they loved having their picture taken holding or touching a snake. This memory for them was a product of the product for the reptile program – a memorable experience. So, we need to plan in more "memorable" opportunities for visitors during their total site visit.

- 🌐 **Engage the five senses** – plan for perceptually exciting areas for them to see and hands-on activities at interpretive stops or opportunities.

## Experience Realms - Planning the mix of experience packages

Figure 1 below illustrates the main experience realms we can plan for and the "psychology" of the total experience(s). In general, visitors come to interpretive sites, or attractions for one or more of these **kinds** of experiences. They are looking for **entertainment**, such as an evening campfire program; **educational** experiences such as attending an interpretive program on the historic or natural history of a site or area; **esthetic** experiences – such as valuing the views, scenery, decorations, music or environment; and **escapist** experiences – such as wanting to go out on a wilderness experience, or seeing a movie to "escape".

On the outer realm of the experiences are the various **levels** of experience participation. They can become **absorbed** in the experience, such watching a play, or "loosing track of time" while they hike a trail or watch wildlife. They can choose levels of **active participation**, such as going on a guided walk or tour, trying their hand at gold panning or fossil hunting. They can choose **passive participation** such as simply "watching" an interpretive activity or attending an interpretive demonstration. And they can chose to **immerse** themselves into the experience, becoming physically (or virtually) a part of the experience itself.

This experience "goes into" the visitor as when playing a virtual reality game or computer activity in a museum or visitor center, or becoming a "historical figure" at a living history site.

**The Experience Realms.**

Note that for most visitors it is not one or the other – many visitors will look for a **package of experiences** in the course of their visit – depending on the nature of your site.

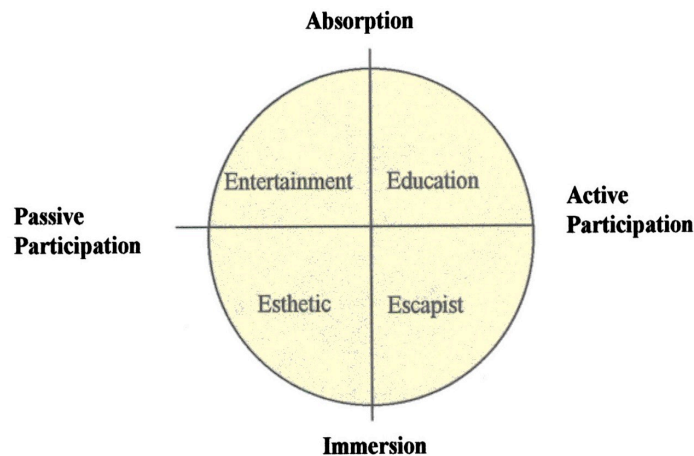


Figure 1 – Mutually compatible experience domains often co-mingle to form unique personal encounters/experiences. (From Pine and Gilmore, 1999).

They may want to have fun and entertainment in the evening, take a class, watch the sunset, and escape the city walking a quite wooded trail. We need to plan for all experience levels and opportunities.

**Planning for the total experience begins at home.**

What the "experience" based planning tells us is that we need to consider the visitors not just as a passive element at our interpretive sites, but the reason that most of our interpretive sites exist. We must plan not just interpretive media and services, but rather plan for a wide range of experience opportunities for visitors, from active and passive, to entertaining or quiet places of reflection. And the experience planning begins at home. This means that as we do our interpretive planning we need to consider:

- **How visitors find out about us** – our marketing and advertising media. Are our brochures or advertisements marketing things (trails, exhibits, etc.) or "experiences" and "benefits" the visitor will receive by visiting our site?
- Our experience planning continues with our **directions as to how to find us**, and the quality of the highway signage and way marking from the main highway exits to our parking lot (orientation systems). Getting lost trying to find an interpretive site or facility is NOT a good experience.
- **The way staff members are trained to meet and greet visitors.** This runs the gamut from the ticket takers, to the food service, to the interpretive staff.
- **The visual cues of our site design and layout.** Can visitors easily find the places they want to see or use? Is there one themed "look" for the total site?
- **The quality of the "memory package" we help visitor put together** – (what will they talk about or remember the most on the trip back home?).
- **The quality of the memorabilia we have available for them** (souvenirs).

And any number of other things that happen to them during their visit – all contributing to the "total experience" for each visitor.

So what's the state-of-the-art in interpretive planning for the year 2000?

In doing interpretive planning today, here is a summary of the key things that we now consider and "plan for:

- Having a clear interpretive theme for the site or attraction.
- Having clear interpretive objectives for all interpretive services, media and programs, as well as for the total site experience (learn, feel, do).
- Having product based objectives for our services and media (are we selling historic buildings – or having visitors value preserving historic buildings?).
- Having cost effective interpretive services or media – so if we spend \$\$\$ on interpretive programs, services or media, we get a real return for our initial investment.
- Planning for the total visitor experience, and planning for a variety of experience opportunities (all experience realms – or as many as possible).
- Planning for the memory package visitors take home with them.
- Planning for reasons for visitors to return to the site or attraction again (and again and again).

## Summary - Moving from "what if" to "what is".

*Try? There is no try. There is only do or not do – Yoda!*

The hardest part of being an interpretive planner is in knowing that what worked in planning yesterday may not work today. I believe that the key to successful interpretive and heritage tourism planning for the year 2000 and beyond involves two steps.

Step #1 – Always keep learning how to do it better.

Step #2 – Implement the things you learned from step#1.

The most exciting thing about interpretive planning for the next millennium is not in what we know about effective interpretive planning today – but the things that we **will know** by next year! It just keeps getting better and more interesting.