
YOU'RE AN ANIMAL!

METAPHORS FOR AUDIENCE ADVOCACY

by Ben Gammon

Who are you? Who do you work for? Why are you at this meeting? Why aren't you researching any exhibition content? Why aren't you responsible for delivering any exhibits? Why are we paying your salary? What do you do?

These are just some of the many questions that I have been asked in the last four years while working on various exhibition projects as an audience advocate. And rightly so, for it has taken me almost as long to work out the answers for myself. When I was first appointed as an audience advocate on an exhibition team I had only the vaguest idea of what role I was supposed to play. Since then I have had to write job descriptions both for my team and myself, establish my credibility with my colleagues, and persuade the museum to employ more audience advocates and increase our budgets. The demand for audience advocacy has never been greater but the more we become established, the greater is the need to define what we are, what we can do and what we are not there to do.

Clearly there is a need for definition, yet there is depressingly little discussion in the literature about what an audience advocate should actually do in an exhibition team other than "evaluation" and "give presentations." We spend so much of our time promoting the "visitor-centred" approach, yet struggle to answer the simple question of what that really means.

Nevertheless I was particularly struck by three papers by Mark St. John, D.D. Hilke, and Judy Rand. Each author takes a rather novel approach to the question—what is an audience advocate?—by describing the role in metaphorical terms. This is both an original and potentially very powerful approach to the question and one worthy of further development.

What sort of a biscuit are you?

This set me thinking of a type of question used extensively in focus groups' projective techniques. These are questions where focus group participants are asked to describe the subject of the discussions as if they were a type of car, drink, colour, gesture etc. In other words to describe the subject of debate in metaphorical terms. For example you might ask a question "If Bill Clinton were a biscuit what sort of biscuit would he be?"

This form of questioning allows people to express opinions that they might otherwise feel uncomfortable about expressing more directly. It also encourages people to think laterally and creatively and provides them with a vocabulary to describe thoughts and feelings they may not have verbalised before. So, I thought, why not use projective questions to explore what my colleagues (both in and out of the visitor studies field) think about audience advocacy. What metaphors would my colleague use to describe me and my team? How would we describe ourselves?

So this is what I did:

I developed a brief two-question survey which I e-mailed to members of five different exhibition teams—a broad mix of subject experts from industry and academia, curators, educational specialists, designers, content researchers, managers. I also sent the questionnaire to eight people working in visitor studies. This is just the sort of multi-disciplinary mix that these days constitutes an exhibition team at the Science Museum and so should represent the range of opinions held about audience advocacy.

The questions I asked were:

1. Imagine you had to describe the job of an audience advocate as being like an animal. What sort of animal should an audience advocate be like? (You can choose more than one animal if you like). Why should an audience advocate be like this animal?
2. If an audience advocate was a film, what film would that be and why?

You're an animal!

A vast range of animals were suggested—although I have to say that small dogs seemed to feature particularly strongly along with cats, owls, elephants, bears, and many more including, I must admit, tapeworms and cockroaches.

The actual animals that people chose—although often amusing and sometimes alarming—were irrelevant. What I was interested in were the reasons given for these choices; i.e., what my colleagues thought an audience advocate should be like. I broke the responses to the first question into descriptive words or phrases. These descriptions were

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then grouped into 11 broad categories which I have named after animals that seem to best represent them.

The Elephant—information seeker

Almost half of the respondents described the audience advocate as being wise, knowledgeable, actively seeking and being a source of information about the Museum's visitor.

"Nosy and never forgets anything"

In many ways this is not surprising, but it was gratifying as this was definitely an image that I had been trying to portray—always able to answer any question about the audience that the team may have.

The Ferret—persistent and tenacious

About a third of the respondents described an audience advocate as being someone who was tough, stubborn, tenacious and persistent.

"Thick-skinned & stubborn, vocal & determined"

About a quarter of respondents felt that the audience advocate should be someone who can—when necessary—be tough or even ferocious. A frequent refrain was along the lines of "they should have teeth and claws and be ready to use them when necessary."

"Loyal but ferocious when necessary"

The Parrot—demanding

Another common description was what I classified as "The Parrot"—vocal, demanding of attention, if necessary, by endless repetition.

Again these are very much the qualities that I hoped people would want in an audience advocate and they are part of the personnel we have tried to develop.

The Guide Dog—guiding, supportive, protecting the team

Over a quarter of my colleagues described audience advocates as someone in rather gentler terms as someone who should guide, support and protect the team from their mistakes – like a sheep dog or a guide dog.

"Reliable, looks out for others. Doesn't think about itself...helping people find their way around"

Other less frequently mentioned descriptions included: alert to what is going on around them, tensed and ready for action like a meerkat; sociable like an ant; empathetic to people's needs like a cat; sly, manipulative like a tapeworm.

Rabbits — non-confrontational/non-threatening

So far I was more than happy with the descriptions of an audience advocate. However, there was a series of responses from a sizable minority of respondents that I found

to be distinctly troubling. These respondents described the audience advocate as being non-confrontational, non-threatening, "fluffy";

"cute and cuddly animal. Friendly, non-threatening, interactive"

There would seem to be a potentially serious disagreement about how an audience advocate should behave in a project team. Some member of the project teams see the audience advocate as a much more passive individual. This is very much something I would disagree with.

What sort of film are you?

Responses to this question were much more varied and difficult to categorise. The range of films mentioned was enormous, from *Au Revoir Les Enfants* to James Bond, *Die Hard* to *Fantasia*. Again I broke the responses down into descriptive words and phrases falling into 11 categories. Interestingly, many of the descriptions elicited by this question were of a very different nature to those obtained by the previous one.

The most common theme to emerge was the idea that an audience advocate should be someone who takes an objective, non-specialist or unusual perspective of the exhibition. This was often described in terms of films which explore the lives of ordinary people.

The second most common theme was that of battles, conflict and coercion. Sometimes this was presented in a positive fashion along the lines of the triumph of good/truth.

As with the previous question, a common theme in people's responses was that of a detective or investigator seeking out information. This was often described in terms of finding what is hidden behind a public image.

"*All the President's Men*. Being an audience advocate requires the sort of tenacity of the two journalists. They didn't stop until they got the results they wanted. They had to battle against all sorts of prejudice and resistance to uncover The Truth."

Another common theme in response to this question was the idea that the audience advocate should be someone who is a good communicator with a strong clear message.

"take the ordinary, the obvious and turn it into something that people will listen to"

Other attributes mentioned included: enthusiasm/high energy; calm; amusing; a problem solver; protective; diplomatic.

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"They should have teeth and claws and be ready to use them when necessary."

Worrying comments

As with the previous question there were a group of comments which I could only classify as frankly worrying for they seemed to highlight faults and failings that I had previously been unaware of. One of my colleagues described an audience advocate as being like a wildlife film, "interesting, but not barrier-breaking." I would sincerely hope that what we do is barrier breaking as this to me would seem to be the essence of audience advocacy.

In a couple of cases the response I received from two fellow audience advocates at another museum is indicative of the problems they are currently experiencing in a battle with the curators on the project.

"*Das Boot* because it's in a foreign language and makes viewers physically uncomfortable. This reflects the fact that audience advocates often seem to be talking a completely different language to curatorial colleagues and can make them want to leave the room."

"*Gone with the Wind* —it is of epic proportions, involves many battles, leaves much unresolved and involves every one in great emotional highs and lows."

Several respondents illustrate the difficulties that audience advocates experience in getting themselves heard and respected. For these people an audience advocate is either a cult film with very limited appeal or a mass-market product that compromises content for popularity.

"Anything art-house with sub-titles...is a bit of effort to watch but the sense that it might be 'improving' makes you sit through it. And it isn't generally the sort of thing you'd rush out and buy the sound-track to."

Conclusions

Combining data from both questions, the characteristics of the audience advocate were described as follows:

- Information seeking
- Taking an objective or visitor-centred perspective
- Tenacious, stubborn, persistent
- Knowledgeable, wise
- Guiding, supportive, protective
- Persuasive, combative, campaigning, battling
- Can be tough and assertive
- Vocal, demanding of attention
- Faithful, reliable, loyal team member
- A good communicator with a strong message
- Alert to what is happening, ready for action
- Problem solver
- Amusing
- Non-confrontational, non-threatening, unobtrusive

How would I answer these questions

I would choose two creatures. The first would be a donkey—in particular the donkey Benjamin in *Animal Farm*. Like Benjamin I believe that audience advocates should be clever and astute to what is going on around

them, someone who can foresee trouble ahead, who knows what battles to fight and when to keep their head down, someone who is not easily fooled by rhetoric and dogma, a survivor who manages to stay (more or less) true to their principles.

The second creature is a virus. Just as a virus integrates its genetic material into that of its host, so too must an audience advocate become an integral part of the exhibition. Like a virus, an audience advocate must seek to spread their influence infecting ever greater numbers of project teams. A virus has no meaningful role outside of a host organism so must always be seeking to spread itself to new hosts. Likewise, an audience advocate must always be looking for his or her next project long before the current one is finished.

As for a film, in the end I chose *The Seven Samurai*; something of an epic battle, with strong, clear messages with characters who go into battle for the weak, who have a strong sense of mission and purpose.

Summary

I do not believe that this is a serious piece of academic research, but I do feel that this can be a very useful tool for anyone wishing to become an audience advocate and who wants to influence the course of an exhibition's development. This study has both helped to focus my thinking and has revealed attitudes and feelings of my colleagues that I have previously been unaware of. It has allowed me to assess how successfully I have projected my own image to the team and where my perception of my role is in conflict with that of individuals within the team.

This is not always a very comforting view; there are some potentially serious conflicts and some worrying admissions about where we as audience advocates fail, but at least I can begin to tackle these issues and to better understand what is expected of an audience advocate.

References

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