

How tour guides help museums execute their strategies

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When most people think about organisational strategy, they think of something that is top-down: a plan that is designed and orchestrated by senior management, which points the organisation towards the future. It's a valid way to think: most organisations do have senior people making strategic plans.

But top-down strategy is just one part of the puzzle. If we really want to understand strategy, my research suggests that we need to look at what people at all levels of the organisation do on a daily basis. Then we can see if the plan means anything at all. Because it's how people live the organisation's strategy that really matters to what gets done in a company, why, how and by whom.

My research emerged from a slightly unconventional setting: I was studying guided tours in museums. This is a much-used but under-studied occupation in the museum field. I wanted to understand what guides did and how they did it. What did a successful tour look like? How did they contribute to the experience of the museum visitor?

And as I followed them around and looked at the video recordings I had made of their tours, it became apparent that their work was closely affiliated to the strategy of the organisation. What they said, how they said it, and how they encouraged their audiences to engage with the museum artefacts and the buildings were shaped in ways which related to the museums' future plans. **The guides, whether they knew it or not, were contributing to organisational strategy.**

Let me give an example. One of the museums studied was 78 Derngate. The majority of their funding originated at that time from the Heritage Lottery Fund, who have an expectation that the organisations they fund have a strategic focus on including diverse audiences. One day, I noticed a guide go to considerable lengths to include young and old members. She bent down to target a simple question at the seven- and eight-year-olds at the front of the group. 'What do you think this does?' When they answered, she responded to them directly before linking what they'd said into her answer, standing back up and using their answer to bridge into more adult-focused, structured talk. No one was left out from the interpretation of the room, despite the diversity of the group.

Acts of inclusion happened repeatedly – welcoming comments and building them into the tour; speaking loudly when members of the audience showed that they were struggling to hear; making use of culture and nationality to channel the audiences towards particular objects or features. Laid out in their bare bones, these examples may sound simple and common-sense. But the guides have a critical but both under-acknowledged and underexploited role to play in meeting a key strategic aim that is central to museum funding.

Another strategic aim of most museums is to balance education and entertainment in a way that is sensitive to the collection. This is certainly an aim of the V&A Museum, which was another site of my research.

It is difficult for any museum to balance these aims, let alone to achieve them simultaneously. The difficulty of designing an audio guide or a shop, for example, which does both is a central problem for the contemporary museum. However, I showed how tour guides were able to contribute, shaping tours to be fun *and* educational at exactly the same time. In one example, a guide took her audience to see a chair by Rampendahl, made of deer's antlers. She poked fun at them for looking so serious and made them laugh, before telling them that whilst it might be grizzly to contemporary tastes, it was a very popular style with Victorians. By picking an extreme object, and then crafting an interesting story about it and using it to draw the audience into an interaction, she was able to balance



education and entertainment. And in doing so, she was helping to realise the organisation's strategy on the front line.

Again, whilst this may sound basic, imagine a scenario where these things didn't happen. The museum may lose funding and the audiences would stop visiting.

These findings have relevance for the tourism and heritage sectors where guides are often an under-utilised resource. By examining what guides do and how they do it, museums can make a strong case for further funding on the basis of their strategic importance. Moreover, they can look at ways to increase their contribution to organisational aims, as the museums studied subsequently did.

But my research has wider significance, too. Organisations that aren't already need to free themselves from the idea that strategy is a top-down plan that is owned and delivered by managers and look at whether and how the activities of their front line workers are contributing towards, or detracting from, organisational strategy. Whatever type of organisation you are, recognising the direct links between the front line workers and the achievement of strategy is something worth exploring.

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Notes:

- *This article is based on the author's paper [Making museum tours better: understanding what a guided tour really is and what a tour guide really does](#), in *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 27 (1). pp. 35-52. ISSN 0964-7775 (2012)*
- *This post gives the views of its author, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
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