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## Interpretive Media Selection

Interpretive media selection is as much art as science. There is rarely only one way to achieve a goal. Involving specialists in key media is highly recommended. Each situation has its own particular mix of factors to consider. Some of the most important elements in a media decision are: message, audience, and resources.

### Message

What is to be communicated affects the method of communication, and vice-versa. Is the message simple or complex? Is it an abstract concept that can only be presented verbally or are there graphic components? Does the concept require a specific sequence or chronology to be understood? Is it helpful or necessary to involve many senses? How can we make the messages attractive? compelling? relevant? What priority does this information have in relation to the overall interpretive program? Should the message be experienced in addition to -- or rather than -- learned didactically? What are the desired outcomes of this communication?

### Audience

The audience must be able to access and comprehend the information. What knowledge and expectations are they likely to have when they arrive at the site? How much time do they have? When would this information be most useful: before, during, or after experiencing the resource? What primary languages? literacy patterns? ages? group types? What are their motivations for coming to the site? Are there cultural differences to take into account? What physical abilities do they have? The more detailed the audience profile, the easier it is to select appropriate media.

### Resources

The quality and quantity of resources available to support media development will not only affect the kind of media selected, but may determine the feasibility and cost of production. Are there landscape elements to support the message? Are they accessible? How much information is available on the selected subject? Has the accuracy of the information been certified? Are there additional perspectives that should be interpreted? Are quality photographs and other graphic elements available and can the proper use rights be obtained? Does the message rely heavily on the use of artifacts and are these artifacts extant and available? Can the artifacts be adequately protected while on display? What kind of budget can be projected? Common types of media used to deliver interpretive messages include audiovisual products, museum exhibits, wayside exhibits, publications, and personal services. Each has qualities which make it more or less suitable for a given application. Some of the recognized strengths and limitations of each medium are listed below. Note that these are generalizations; exceptions can usually be found.

## **Audiovisual Media**

### Advantages

- Well suited to the presentation of chronological and sequential material
- Can capture realism and provide emotional impact
- Provide opportunities for dramatization
- Can be portable for off-site use
- Provide views of places, animals, plants, and seasons otherwise unavailable or inaccessible
- Can create a mood or atmosphere
- Can reach many visitors at one time
- Can be adapted to serve physically impaired visitors
- Can illustrate before and after effects
- Can be produced in different languages

### Limitations

- Cannot be used everywhere
- Require back-up equipment, periodic maintenance, and regular monitoring
- May be perceived as sterile or impersonal
- May offer little opportunity for visitors to browse or study an item in depth or at their own pace
- Repetitious sound tracks can annoy visitor center staff
- May be a visual or auditory intrusion
- Production and maintenance costs can be expensive
- People usually have high expectations of audiovisual media; low-budget products can fall short of expectations

## **Museum Exhibits**

### Advantages

- Can be viewed at visitors' own paces
- Can be designed in all shapes, sizes, colors, and textures
- Can display objects associated with the site
- Can incorporate artifacts, artwork, or mixed media to produce desired atmosphere and effects
- Can transcend language and cultural barriers
- Can promote the use of the senses to aid the perception of the able-bodied and handicapped visitor alike
- Can promote visitor participation
- Can be designed for both indoor and outdoor use
- Are well suited for ideas which can be illustrated graphically
- Permanent exhibits can be grouped with rotating, seasonal, or temporary displays to provide a sense of change
- Can provide experiences of varying complexity, allowing visitors to select the depth they choose

### Limitations

- Are sensitive to agents of deterioration
- Require security and maintenance
- Must be housed in adequate facilities
- Do not work well to tell largely verbal, complex, or sequential stories
- Exhibit materials may have high commercial value, making them targets for theft
- Can be very expensive
- Inexpensive exhibits may look amateurish, and are usually less effective than higher-quality (and more expensive) productions
- Technology and materials can overwhelm the message

## Personal Services

### Advantages

- Direct human to human communication is often more enjoyable to visitors than communication by impersonal media
- Can easily be customized to meet visitor needs or changing conditions
- Can use group/visitor reactions to stimulate interest
- Can be interactive
- May be monitored and changed accordingly
- Tap diverse skills of interpreters
- Versatile, effective, and relatively easy to implement
- Can be cost effective, especially in the short term
- Can convey complex messages, and help visitors connect tangibles and intangibles to universal concepts

### Limitations

- Require well-trained interpreters
- May not give consistent messages
- Require close supervision and management
- Can be difficult and expensive to maintain year round
- High recurring costs
- Can be difficult to critique properly

## Publications

### Advantages

- Are portable
- Can treat a subject in-depth
- Provide a source of detailed reference information
- Can be produced in different languages
- Suited to presenting sequential or complex material
- Can be read at visitors' own pace
- Can produce income
- Can often be revised at a reasonable cost
- Can be produced at various levels of detail
- Have value as a souvenir, something to take home

- Can be used before going to a site, during the visit, or after returning home
- Can be produced to treat the same subject for different audiences
- May be appropriate for stories lacking in artifacts or photographs

#### Limitations

- Can discourage potential readers with lengthy and/or complex texts
- Can be a source of litter
- Require periodic revision to remain current and accurate
- May require facilities and maintenance (such as brochure dispensers)

## Wayside Exhibits

#### Advantages

- Can be available 24 hours a day
- Use real objects and features in their own setting as objects of interpretation
- Are relatively inexpensive
- Can be designed to blend with site environment
- Provide onsite interpretation of specific sites and stories
- Can depict a place as it appeared many years before
- Can show a feature from a view unattainable by visitors
- Can illustrate phenomena that are invisibly affecting a resource
- Establish a park identity at remote, unstaffed locations
- Alert visitors to safety or resource management issues at the point of danger, decision, or environmental impact
- Can be replaced relatively quickly and inexpensively

#### Limitations

- Limited amount of text and graphics per panel
- Don't work well for complicated subject matter
- Focus attention on tangible resources; less effective with intangibles and universal concepts
- May intrude on a park's visual landscape
- May not be practical at sites with climatic or environmental extremes
- Susceptible to vandalism

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Courtesy Linda Thomas

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