

## **GETTING YOUR MESSAGE ACROSS: WOT'S "HOT" AND WOT'S NOT?**

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*The future is not some place we are going, but one we are creating.  
The paths to it are not found but made, and the activity of making  
them changes both the maker and the destination (Anon).*

### **Introduction**

Interpretation is "a means of communicating ideas and feelings which helps people enrich their understanding and appreciation of their world and their role within it" (IAA 1996:3). Interpretation has also been described as a means of stimulating and encouraging nature conservation (QNPWS 1985), an educational activity which reveals meanings and relationships (Tilden 1977), communication which stirs a visitor's interest (Bigelow 1994) and a process which changes the way people perceive their world (Williamson in MacFarlane 1994).

Interpreters are informed that presentations must be thematic, they must be interesting, and they must involve the audience (Tilden 1977; Sharpe 1981; QNPWS 1985; Ham 1992). In doing so, interpreters may employ a range of techniques and media in an attempt to get their messages across. However, Uzzell (1989b:3) questions the effectiveness of this effort, believing that "the power, persuasiveness and significance of the message lie in the story itself rather than the ever more complicated technology [used] to communicate it". It must, therefore, be asked: are we really getting our messages across, or are we wasting our time? Hot interpretation,

rather than the latest technology, maybe the answer that some interpreters are looking for.

### **Communication Tactics: Harnessing The Emotions**

Ultimately interpretation aims to assist people to understand their natural world and their role in it (IAA 1996). As a result, interpretive programs are opportunities to educate the public and contribute to a lifestyle change. For example, "through interpretation, understanding; through understanding, appreciation; through appreciation, protection" (Tilden 1977:38). Consequently, what exactly are we trying to change: attitude or behaviour? This question has been debated in the literature for many years with no firm conclusions deducted (Uzzell 1989b).

Research has revealed that past experiences influence people's attitudes, attitudes influence the way a person behaves towards learning and their relationship with the environment (Pearce & Moscardo 1988; Mackay 1994). Lerbinger (1972), Bettinghaus (1973) and Slater (1992) also agree that expressed behaviour is the result of attitude. Therefore, to produce an attitude or behaviour change involves the alteration of people's beliefs, knowledge and perceptions.

However, we are also told that it may be more worthwhile to tackle people's behaviour instead, to provide a new experience from which new conclusions can be drawn and new attitudes formed (Fishbein & Manfredo 1992; McCool & Braithwaite 1992; Mackay 1994; Knapp 1995).

Given the inconsistencies regarding attitude and behaviour, our best approach may be to utilise the most effective communication strategies available when presenting interpretive programs. Mackay (1994) suggests that while talking is one of the easiest communication methods, it may not be the best way to approach the situation of persuasion. While there are no foolproof strategies for influencing audiences, Mackay puts forward that we should be open and honest in our approach and aim for some degree of cooperation.

Research over the years has also uncovered an important message for interpreters. That is, people will always pay more attention when the basic human emotions of fear, anxiety and pity are aroused (McCool & Braithwaite 1992; Heylin 1993). This is based on the theory of cognitive dissonance (McCool & Braithwaite 1992) or dynamic disequilibrium (Forestell 1992), where arousal of emotional tension leads to audience motivation and willingness to accept the communicator's recommendations in an attempt to reestablish harmony. This thinking is considered a step in the right direction for strong personal lifestyle change (McCool & Braithwaite 1992).

The presentation of images and events which have the ability to capture and symbolise a variety of emotional commitments and values in the audience also have powerful persuasive impacts (Slater 1992). However, many

interpretive programs rarely capture this. Uzzell (1989b) questions why interpreters do not interpret day-to-day environmental issues hotly, why we do not use our energy to portray our environmental concerns, and why we are unable to interpret environmental issues with intensity, passion and commitment. Is this because interpreters lack the love, inspiration and passion for the environment that Tilden speaks of?

### **Turning Up The Heat: The Hotter The Better**

Given all the interpretive techniques and media available, very rarely are *feelings* incorporated into an interpretive presentation, even though *feelings* are central to many definitions of interpretation (see Tilden 1977; QNPWS 1985; Bigelow 1994; IAA 1996). This may be because many interpretive programs are presented in a detached and cool manner. Rarely do such presentations evoke any type of emotion arousal in the audience or the presenter, very rarely are they influential. This is a major indication of modern society where nearly every major decision made in our lives is approached with cool objectivity (Uzzell 1989b). However, when presented with information which challenges us personally or will effect our personal interests, values or beliefs, it is unlikely that people will sit back and accept such information without contesting the issue (Uzzell 1989b). Uzzell provides a challenge for interpreters, asking if we are prepared to interpret the day-to-day environmental issues facing us, to awaken awareness and shock the complacent into action. There is definitely a need for a heartfelt approach to interpretation. Our environmental resources and biodiversity are dwindling away in front of our very eyes, our path to destruction is paramount unless this sense of outrage and

despair is incorporated into our interpretive presentations.

Tilden's (1977) fourth principle of interpretation told that a chief aim of interpretation was not instruction, but provocation. Tilden (1997:91) also provides the interpreter with a challenge, "to put your visitor in possession of at least one disturbing idea that may grow into a fruitful interest". Confronting people with the underlying emotional consequences also transmits a powerful message (Heylin 1993). Uzzell (1989b) defines this approach as HOT interpretation.

HOT interpretation requires the presenter to make the audience feel uncomfortable, uncomfortable enough that they are willing to listen and possibly act for the betterment of the environment in order to alleviate their feelings of cognitive dissonance and dynamic disequilibrium. Adopting the HOT approach allows the interpreter to use the passion that motivated them to work for the natural environment in the first place to their advantage, to make a difference, before it becomes too late.

Research into communication theory has demonstrated that the HOT approach does have merits when attempting to get any type of message across, including environmental concerns (Uzzell 1989; McCool & Braithwaite 1992; Heylin 1993). HOT interpretation is emotional and thought provoking. It challenges the audience to question their personal interests. HOT interpretation not only outlines the issue, it puts the audience right in the firing line.

Interpreters deal with issues on a day-to-day basis that have the potential to have the heat turned up on the presentation style. To name a

few, land clearing, air and water pollution, loss of biodiversity, wildlife protection, inappropriate visitor behaviour, and nature conservation. The *truth* is out there. Many people are ignorant to it, but it is an interpreter's responsibility to portray the *truth* in the most effective manner.

## Conclusion

Interpretive programs should be opportunities to educate the public by increasing their awareness and understanding, and even contribute to an attitude-behaviour or behaviour-attitude change. If this is to happen, interpreters may need to turn up the heat of their presentation style and shock, move and motivate the complacent into action. Possibly the question interpreters should be asking themselves, may not necessarily be the best way to get a message across, but how can HOT interpretation be turned into HOT action for the betterment of the environment.

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