

Big ideas and human stories

Formative Evaluation

*Engaging visitors with Forgotten Empire:
the world of Ancient Persia*

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This is an online version of a report prepared by MHM for the British Museum. Commercially sensitive information has been removed

Big ideas and human stories

Refer to separate document for report appendices

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Both current and potential visitors are impressed by the plans for Forgotten Empire: the world of Ancient Persia.

Their primary engagement is **intellectual** (the big ideas) and **emotional** (the human stories) rather than an aesthetic attraction to 'treasures'.

Current visitors lack subject knowledge and need clear **propositions**.

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1 The brief



Morris Hargreaves McIntyre was commissioned by the British Museum to carry out a formative evaluation of the forthcoming temporary exhibition *Forgotten Empire: the world of Ancient Persia*.

The Museum sought to test visitor reactions to the proposed exhibition plans and marketing materials. With the exhibition in its latter stages of planning, the purpose of the research was not to question the fundamentals, but to identify any potential issues within the existing proposals and make appropriate recommendations to address them.

1.1 Methodology

In order to achieve the research objectives, we moderated two focus groups at the British Museum.

Focus groups are run with small numbers of people (traditionally eight individuals) with similar characteristics who represent the organisation's target market segments. In sitting down with a cohesive group of individuals and exploring issues related to their perceptions, motivations and attitudes concerning an organisation, its programme, products, brand or communications messages. Although the findings lack the statistical weight of quantitative research, it is possible to obtain a depth and quality of response that is illuminating. When groups concur, the findings are usually reliable.

Trained and experienced moderators who have knowledge of psychology, a natural curiosity and intuition, and well-developed analytical skills facilitate focus groups. Various techniques can be used to stimulate participants' thinking and elicit responses, such as stimulus materials, word association, image sorting, sentence completion, brand personification and bubble diagrams. Focus groups 'hot-house' the issues, bringing them to the forefront of participants' minds and encouraging them to explore the issues in-depth.

Focus groups form the basis of qualitative research; their findings are not generally interpreted quantitatively, although they can be used to identify issues to be explored through quantitative research.

The groups were segmented using the following criteria:

Current visitors

Those who had visited the British Museum in the past 12 months, including a number who had visited the recent *Sudan: Past and Present* exhibition at the Museum.

Potential visitors

Those who had not visited the British Museum in the past two years, but had visited other museums in that period.

Full transcripts from the groups, the discussion plan and examples of the stimulus materials are included in the appendices (separate document).

2 The decision to visit

The decision to visit any exhibition can be influenced by a number of factors are in the Museum's control. We tested visitors' reactions to the exhibition title, together with alternative propositions, the price and marketing materials.

2.1 Exhibition title



Reactions to the title *Forgotten Empire: the world of Ancient Persia*, were on the whole positive. Unsurprisingly, *Current visitors* were the most emphatic in their support.

I saw it as intriguing **Current visitor**

...you would expect it is going to be quite exciting and grabbing **Current visitor**

I would be tempted to look at it **Potential visitor**

Knowledge of the Persian Empire varied among individuals in the groups, some were aware that it encompassed modern day Iran and that it was very large, but most were vague on details. Most had no idea when the Persian Empire existed, their guesses ranged over 4,000 years. That most respondents did not have a detailed understanding of the Persian Empire made the title proposition an interesting one; offering them the opportunity to develop their knowledge.

I think that it is very worthwhile finding out what other cultures are capable of. I mean, we don't really know and we don't really learn much at school about the Chinese Empire etc **Potential visitor**

You have got the Byzantine and the Roman Empire and the British Empire.

They are the attention grabbing empires, but not the Persian unfortunately

Current visitor

In terms of what they would expect to see in the proposed exhibition, both groups identified material culture from the period as forming the basis of such an exhibition.

Jewellery, armour, pottery, weapons, stonework **Current visitor**

Royal relics, gold and insignia **Potential visitor**

They hoped that the exhibition would also offer insight into the culture and society of the Empire.

Explanatory material and maps showing the movement of the peoples supported by artefacts Current visitor
How they lived and what they did and what they used Potential visitor

2.2 Propositions

We tested the reactions of *Current* and *Potential visitors* to five alternative propositions for the exhibition. Full details of the propositions tested are included in the report appendices.

Forgotten history

This proposition was well received by both groups. They liked idea of redressing the balance of history and seeing the past from a different perspective, a non-Western perspective.

It is quite positive that they are accepting history is written by the victors, I think that is quite interesting Current visitor
The Greeks conquered the Persians so we have a biased historical reference there and we really don't know a great deal Potential visitor

This was seen as an engaging and proactive learning challenge

...you are drawn into finding out what the truth is, or maybe there is an alternative Potential visitor
...it is an opportunity to learn something that we don't know Potential visitor

Understand the culture

Current visitors expressed some negativity towards the opening sentence of this proposition – offering the opportunity to discover the wealth and sophistication of Persian culture through its material culture. They felt it did not offer them anything unique.

The first sentence just makes me go 'yeah whatever we have got lots of beautiful objects for you to look at' ...if you are going to choose to go and look at something it is more interesting to go because you are interested in something in particular about that culture. Current visitor

For both *Current* and *Potential visitors*, there was considerable appeal in the second sentence – offering the opportunity to understand the Persian model of Empire. The groups were intrigued and challenged in a positive way by this prospect.

*It challenges established notions, which I am interested in Potential visitor
My understanding is that the amount of cultural diversity and cultural
exchange was actually very productive in a lot of ways. So to me that is
quite interesting and may make me conceptualise empire in another way.*

Current visitor

The appeal of this proposition came, in a large part, from the language used. The phrases 'religious and social tolerance' and 'cultural diversity' keying successfully into modern social mores.

*The second sentence I find really quite enticing just because it has got
modern words in it and so the language I can sort of associate with it and
see how it can be different to modern society Current visitor*

*...the religious and social tolerance, I would be interested to see how that
would be expressed Current visitor*

It puts it in perspective with everything else Potential visitor

Some *Potential visitors* were less won over by this proposition. They felt that the terminology was bland and the proposition lacked overall appeal.

It is the usual sort of generic terminology Potential visitor

It needs to sound more glamorous Potential visitor

It just doesn't make you think that it will be very good Potential visitor

The past helps you understand the present

In general, the prospect of understanding Islamic Iran today was an appealing one for both groups.

*It is challenging really to see how Ancient Persia might enlighten us a
little bit more about Islamic Iran today Potential visitor*

*I think you lose perspective if you don't take account of what has gone on
before and how things came to be ...the British Museum should play its
part in putting that forward Current visitor*

However, there were real concerns about the ability of one exhibition to span the ancient and modern worlds while providing meaningful insight into both.

*I find that quite off-putting because from my limited understanding of the
rise of Islam is much, much later than Persia ...It is kind of shoe horned
in. Current visitor*

I find it a little far-fetched Potential visitor

Furthermore, a number of *Current visitors* questioned the validity of an exhibition that purports to connect the past to the present, believing it to be a problematic, even tokenistic, construct.

I totally disagree with that personally. I think it is rubbish Current visitor
Some exhibitions overplay the links with the modern world Current visitor
...it is trying too hard to justify itself and constantly to refer to today to get a point Current visitor

Visit the past

This proposition was very resonant with visitors. The possibility of immersing oneself in an ancient world is a thrilling one, while the city of Persepolis offers a point of connection with the past.

I like the sound of it. It is very enticing Current visitor
The name Persepolis does jump out at you. I have met people that have been there Potential visitor

See beautiful treasures

The prospect of seeing beautiful treasures in the exhibition was a pleasing one. Visitors do appreciate historical objects for their aesthetic value.

I like that one because I like treasure and I like looking at it Current visitor
Some things can be aesthetically beautiful and you can appreciate that for itself Potential visitor

In addition, the groups liked that the exhibition would include loans from other countries' collections.

That is interesting and I like the idea that things are borrowed that you wouldn't normally get to see Current visitor
I like it and that they have borrowed from Iran Current visitor

However, while visitors enjoy the inclusion of beautiful objects and loans in an exhibition, this in itself is not a big enough pull. Visitors expect there to be treasure objects in the exhibition, but in 'treasure' in itself is an insufficient proposition. They are looking for something altogether more challenging and engaging.

They don't mean as much if you are just looking at them and you don't even have the slightest knowledge of the history of where they are from and what the people were like Current visitor
...well they can be as pleasant, but for me you want to be drawn in a little bit more. Current visitor

Overall, the 'treasures' proposition was felt to be a vacuous one promising little more than 'eye candy'.

...it just leaves me cold, it is all a bit 'come on, come on, come and see the treasures and come and see the sparkly things' Potential visitor

...you might as well just walk in Selfridges Current visitor

A hint of tourism about it Potential visitor

Visitors are looking to be challenged and to feel connected

For both groups, the most resonant propositions were those that encouraged them to think. The prospects of understanding different points of view (the past from a non-Western perspective) and increasing their understanding (the Persian Model of Empire) were hugely appealing.

That whole thing about seeing it from a different perspective is brilliant

Potential visitor

I would go for religious and social tolerance and cultural diversity. The

others I think sound interesting but I might not come Current visitor

Visitors are also interested in feeling connected to the past. The 'visit the past' proposition is highly engaging because it offers visitors a point of connection with people and places from the past.

...my interest is in human beings Potential visitor

stories Current visitor

'Treasure' is not a key driver for visitors; visitors expect to see treasures but treasures on their own are not alluring enough. They look to the objects to understand the people and ideas that engendered them, this understanding should flow from the objects.

...you have got to say religious or cultural development and the artefacts to show how people worshipped and related and how they thought and we would like to see the connection between the two Potential visitor

They don't mean as much if you are just looking and you don't even have the slightest knowledge of the history of where they are from and what the people were like Current visitor

2.3 Promotional print

The print materials have universal appeal

Both groups liked the proposed print materials. The line-drawing feature was felt to be modern and a welcome break from traditional representations of museum objects.

It is better than having a picture Current visitor

I like that it doesn't show specific items, you would expect to see an enamel vase or something ceramic Potential visitor

The red colour-way was the most universally popular among the groups as it fits with the impression of richness and opulence they have of Persia. This was closely followed by the blue colour-way.

I like the red, the richer version picked out in gold Current visitor

The Wedgewood especially is popular and I think it would appeal Potential visitor

Red or blue, I like both Potential visitor

Although some liked the green colour-way, others felt that the tone of green was duller than expected. The beige colour-way was disliked by most as it was felt to lack vibrancy

I imagined jade greens rather than these more muted colours Current visitor

...that is kind of a dung colour ...whether it had more charge and pizzazz to it Current visitor

It should be richer Current visitor

'Persia' is evocative

The word 'Persia' is felt to carry with it many evocative connotations, consequently visitors felt that the word itself should be made prominent on the promotional materials for added impact.

The thing that would interest me most is the word 'Persia' ...the word

Persia is the imaginative stimulant in that poster Current visitor

Persia does carry quite a lot of connotations Current visitor

It has got the kind of magic Current visitor

3 The exhibition



The groups were asked to express their immediate expectations of the display and interpretation of *Forgotten Empire: the world of Ancient Persia*. They were then 'walked' through the exhibition plans using stimulus materials and asked to voice their comments, concerns and ideas for each of the defined sections.

3.1 Hopes and fears

Visitors want an immersive environment

Both *Current* and *Potential* visitors seek an immersive exhibition environment. They hope that lighting and display techniques will be used in the exhibition to create a sense of atmosphere; transporting them back to ancient Persia.

*I would like to feel transformed if I went into it ...transport us Current visitor
...it would be quite mesmerising. Something to grab you when you walked
in. I can imagine it being quite dark and quite atmospheric Current visitor*

Persia evokes impressions of richness and opulence; visitors expect this to be reflected in the exhibition design and object selection. They are looking for a rich visual feast.

*I think it will be beautiful Potential visitor
Sumptuous, exotic and red and gold Current visitor*

To relate to people

Human stories facilitate visitors' understanding of objects and themes. Visitors anticipate that the interpretation in the exhibition will make this connection between the objects and the people that conceived them.

*Empathy and understanding, understanding that this is about humanity and
about the people and artefacts ...how we understand and make those
connections Potential visitor
I would like to have a connection with the objects to the people and to be
able to imagine very vividly how these things were used, or what happened
Current visitor*

Visitors also hope that the exhibition will enable them to relate to the people of the period.

A timeline and where they lived, buildings, how they lived that would be interesting and who were they. Where did they come from and what is their story. Everyday living would be interesting as well **Current visitor**
I want it relating really ...to the people **Potential visitor**

Points of reference

Visitors seek points of reference to enable them to conceptualise the past. They are looking for contemporary comparisons within the exhibition to facilitate their understanding of a distant past.

If it was the buildings then it would hopefully be some sense of scale and significance of what the place was at the time ...something that in a way connected that **Current visitor**
It would be interesting if there were any kind of parallels to compare it. Not just about size, but what it is that creates Empires and what is that motivation **Potential visitor**

To be challenged intellectually

Most visitors do not seek a passive experience, rather they hope that the exhibition will be challenging and thought provoking, and provide for an active learning experience.

I expect to come away informed, seriously informed in an academic sense
Potential visitor
It would probably change my image of the Middle East **Potential visitor**

They fear a boring exhibition

Potential visitors articulated the most fears regarding the exhibition, *Potential visitors* felt that the interpretation may contain information that they are not interested in, delivered in an un-engaging manner.

...objects with dates and bits of information. Nothing that actually connects me and makes you think. Nothing that pulls me in **Potential visitor**
I expect things like dates, locations... **Potential visitor**

They had similar concerns regarding presentation, fearing that it may be traditional and uninspiring.

...a big large room and it would be dark ...the idea of how it would look I immediately think that there isn't going to be much happening Potential visitor
A couple of large rooms, lots of rows of glass cases Potential visitor

3.2 Reactions to the plans

The entrance

The large murals and stone casts at the entrance to the exhibition were appealing to the groups. Some felt that the entrance sounded sufficiently intriguing to pull them in, should they be in the Museum for another reason.

The sheer size of it would be fairly impressive. I think that would be enough for me to think wow I want to look Potential visitor
It certainly grabs your attention. It would probably make me want to explore it more if I was just wondering past Current visitor

The Persian Empire

Visitors like the idea of a timeline at the start of the exhibition. However, rather than the proposed 'simple' timeline, they want the timeline to provide additional context, including a sense of what went before and after the Empire and references to world events. They would like to see this represented graphically, ideally in a large format on the wall.

I get quite frustrated when things are too simple because I really need to know when this is and how it is related to other things and sometimes you get these very basic timelines, which can be quite irritating. Current visitor
'There will be a simple timeline which will record all the major kings and important events' and it is that thing again isn't it where it is just focusing on the major things and you need the bits to fill it in Potential visitor

With most visitors having only a limited knowledge of the period, the introductory section needs to furnish them with sufficient context before they approach the main exhibition. Visual references such as maps are a useful means of achieving this.

It would be good to have maps at the beginning with the timeline Current visitor
There is that whole context thing going on. I am imagining almost the map of empire sort of expanding through time Potential visitor

That the statue of Darius does not have a head is problematic for visitors. It is important for them to see some kind of representation of the king's face, as without this they find it difficult to connect with him.

What did he look like? His head is not there, what did he look like, do we know this? Potential visitor
he hasn't got a head and that is a problem ...your mind will immediately want that and so some other representation of his face Current visitor

Palaces of kings

Visitors were impressed with the plans for this room, the large-scale objects offering them the opportunity to get a feel for the architecture of the Empire. They would also like to understand the human stories behind the buildings; how the people of Ancient Persia would have experienced these palaces.

It will be beautiful and stunning but is the idea for us to be knocked out by it? How many people in that empire would have seen those palaces? Potential visitor
What would have gone on there? Potential visitor

The video loop showing the construction and destruction of the palaces was also well received. Visitors would appreciate further assistance in visualising the buildings; this might include replica models or artist's impressions.

If I come into a room and there are lots of bits of the building and it doesn't show me what the building was then it would be confusing Current visitor
Models of the people and what their villages would have looked liked will spark the imagination Current visitor

Some *Current visitors* felt that, as the biggest room in the exhibition, this space was considerably smaller than they would have expected it to be.

...the room does sound a bit smaller than I expected it to be Current visitor
that there seems to be bigger spaces and more impressive things that I saw in the museum when I was able to walk around for free, ...this seems less significant Current visitor

The royal table

Visitors are looking for the human stories behind the objects. They want to understand the role of the objects in terms of how they were made and used by the people of the time.

*Did they have any ritual context or just domestic? Potential visitor
Maybe tracing the history of those objects, if they have come from outlying
areas of the empire and what is their story Potential visitor*

Control of empire

Visitors seek an educating experience and are keen to understand the Empire. They want insight into the big themes, including the ideological foundations, diversity and economic model of Empire.

*What does it say about the people and how they subscribed to this empire
and how do they relate to this empire? So you have to hear a bit about all
these diverse people. Potential visitor
The communication route as well and the most popular routes and where
the main routes for trade were Current visitor*

Again the issue of human stories is key for visitors as it enables them to connect with the past and make sense of the objects in the exhibition.

*There is this poor guy with a sack full of letters in effect and he has got to
make it over how many miles? Potential visitor
...these couriers that have come back. What conversation they might be
having. Potential visitor*

Luxury in life and death

In general, visitors struggle with abstract concepts, requiring visual clues to help them connect with and understand the past. The grave in this section works very well in this respect as it offers visitors this visual link to the past.

*The grave thing does it... It some way connects you with the people from
there Current visitor
That is the kind of thing I think that is good, as opposed to the items.
Seeing it actually in situ, even if it is a reconstructed thing. I think it really
helps Potential visitor*

Throughout the exhibition visitors are looking for the human elements. Objects from the period are not enough in themselves; they cannot connect to the objects or make real sense of the themes without the human elements.

*That rich jewellery stuff is a real turn off to me. The grave is more
interesting than the stuff. Potential visitor
I am not really swayed very much by any of the gold stuff, but the thing
with the person in would be completely different. Current visitor*

End of empire

Having engaged visitors and aroused their interest in the period, the Museum should offer jumping-off points for those who want to further deepen their understanding. This might include relevant links to the permanent collections.

Is there any other information in the museum elsewhere about Alexander?
Current visitor

Enduring legacy

That the exhibition ended with a reference to the present day was felt to be a positive thing, as it places the empire within its wider historical context.

That is good, the whole relating to now *Potential visitor*

3.3 Overall response

Visitors like the sound of the exhibition

In general, both *Current* and *Potential visitors* were impressed with the plans for the exhibition. They were interested in the subject matter, themes and exhibition content.

From what we looked at ...I think it sounds quite a satisfying and encompassing exhibition *Current visitor*
I think it is fascinating *Potential visitor*

Need deliver on the proposition

If visitor expectations are to be met, or indeed exceeded, the Museum needs to ensure that the exhibition delivers the propositions. The propositions must be more than simply a marketing device.

I am only worried that I am not going to find out the sort of things that I want to find out *Potential visitor*
...diversity isn't anywhere on here *Current visitor*

Getting in the potentials

The difference between *Potential* and *Current visitors* is the key issue of getting *Potential visitors* into the Museum; there is little difference between them in terms of their reactions to the proposals. Only when *Potential visitors* change their view of the Museum as a whole, will they consider visiting an exhibition at the Museum. For them the external communications and brand

perception are key in achieving this. These visitors are highly receptive to advertising, as long as it appeals directly to them.

I think the advertising is really important Potential visitor

It is very intriguing and that is in the advertising Potential visitor

... you might read about something in Time Out and you go that is coming and yeah that sound interesting, but unless suddenly when it is on it is

there in your face it kind of goes. I like the advertising Potential visitor

There is nothing tacky about advertising yourself Potential visitor

4 Strategic issues and recommendations

4.1 Interpretation



Both *Current* and *Potential visitors* were very clear as to which of the propositions they found most appealing. They are highly interested in intellectual stimulation (the big ideas) and emotional connections (the human stories), and want the exhibition to consistently deliver on these.

Curatorial policy matrix

We have developed a scale that outlines the different curatorial approaches to the selection of objects and the development of interpretation.

The scale can be used to plot any element of the museum visitor experience. At one end of the scale, we have a wholly *Object led* approach, in which the aim is to display as many objects as possible and interpretation is minimal. Visitors need to be proactive and make their own meaning. This approach was characteristic of Victorian museums and is still widespread in museum displays that have not been redisplayed for some time. At the other end of the scale, we have a wholly *Outcome led* approach, in which real objects are not necessary and understanding is derived from entirely from experience. An example of this might be the Natural History Museum’s earthquake simulator.

Curatorial policy matrix

	Display	Access	Insight	Inspire	Impact	Spectacle	
OBJECT LED Objects	Museum displays important collection	Museum wants to give access to important collection	Museum reorganises / redisplay / acquires / selects from its collections to create coherent themes	Museum selects / collects objects to support coherent themes	Museum uses iconic objects to illustrate themes and create impact	Real objects or collections not necessary	OUTCOME LED Objects
OBJECT LED Interpretation	Little or none. Visitors need to be proactive and make own meaning	Labels and text with information about objects	Optimised to give many ways into stories behind objects	Designed to inspire discovery and learning	Environment, experience, interpretation provokes response.	Wholly experiential	OUTCOME LED Interpretation

Using the *Curatorial policy matrix* we would plot visitors hopes for the exhibition at *Insight*. Visitors are looking to the objects in *Forgotten Empire* to provide them with an understanding of the big themes; including the Persian model of empire, cultural diversity and an alternative historical

perspective. In order to connect together the objects and the themes, visitors look to the interpretation to provide them with resonant stories. The most resonant stories for visitors are the human stories, as they are most readily able to relate to other people.

There is a fear, held principally by *Potential visitors*, that the exhibition is going to take an *Access* approach, with the interpretation providing information about the objects, rather than insight into them.

Recommendation

Engagement: The Museum must therefore ensure that the interpretation provides for sufficient human stories to enable visitors to engage deeply with the objects and themes within the exhibition.



Morris Hargreaves McIntyre is a creative and intelligent arts management consultancy working in the interests of audience and organisational development.

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