

## **Soft Opening Post Occupancy Evaluation at Te Papa, the Museum of New Zealand**

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Te Papa, New Zealand's new and massive national museum, opened on 14 February 1998. Ten years in the planning, the finished building represented on opening day a NZ\$317,000,000 government investment in culture (US\$177 million). This paper will discuss the project in brief and then examine the soft-opening post occupancy evaluation that had taken place two months prior to the February opening. It is the outline of a paper delivered at the American Association of Museum's Annual Meeting in Los Angeles, 1998

Te Papa is a bicultural museum in a country of many cultures. This is because, regardless of the number of cultures represented, there are truly only two "partners" in the country known as New Zealand: Maori, or those there by right of first discovery (tangata whenua); and those there by right of a treaty signed with the Crown in 1840, the Treaty of Waitangi. In addition to being bicultural, the museum is a "forum for the nation" for the discussion of matters pertaining to national identity. New Zealand is engaged in such crucial discussions in ways similar to the fervor that was evident in the so-called American Renaissance in the United States. The museum, consequently, is always in the news for one identity-related reason or another. To be called a "forum" and have it otherwise would be oxymoronic. In addition, Te Papa is charged with "changing peoples' perceptions of museums", and it is doing that through the introduction of techniques and programmes that are new to the museum setting: "Dark rides"; virtual reality entertainments; an outdoor park complete with caving adventures; a living "marae" or meeting place for all cultures that make up New Zealand.

Te Papa has developed its exhibits and programmes with issues of identity in mind. Consequently, its collections policies and scholarship strategies focus on such matters, as well. Most of the world identifies New Zealand as a country blessed with a spectacular natural beauty; and many recognise the rich heritage of the Maori culture, as well. Indeed, these are the two key attractors for those international guests who visit New Zealand. Kiwis value these attributes, as well, and this is why they form two of the major portions of Te Papa's exhibit programmes. The museum also has extensive galleries devoted to history, art and the rich diversity of Pacific cultures which have contributed to the national identity of New Zealand.

Planning for Te Papa incorporated extensive visits to benchmark museums of the world and a picking and choosing of the best qualities of the best. These tours took place in the Eighties. Following this the planning involved a comprehensive programme of evaluation, visitor and market research to contribute to the development of a museum and exhibits, events and programmes that would create an experience that was appealing to the broadest possible audience. Research was also conducted to project total visitation to Te Papa. Attendance projections were, by most peoples' standards, quite optimistic; Te Papa estimated that 723,000 people would visit in the first year of opening. Wellington, Te Papa's home, and the capital of the country, claims 350,000 residents, so this was quite an adventurous call in the eyes of many. Yet, on the date of this paper's delivery in L.A., Te Papa had achieved its goal...in a mere 89 days since its opening. The remainder of this paper will examine a key ingredient of Te Papa's project planning process, which was undertaken in the final stages of the project, the evaluations and observations that were conducted during our soft openings.

Two soft openings were held in December, two months before the opening day. Te Papa was practically complete: That is, as complete as a museum could be without visitors. To attain a further state of completion would require a public testing of the facilities and the programmes. The specific aims of the soft openings were: To test the building's functionality; To test daily operations plans in their draft forms; To gather feedback; and, finally, To identify high priority changes that could be attended to prior to opening. Evaluations were undertaken from a variety of perspectives: An external expert observed and individually reported on the commercial operations and delivery of the visitor experience; Te Papa staff members undertook to list a number of matters that would be observed

closely (i.e. care of collections, effectiveness of audio-visual technologies, etc.); The management team gathered findings pertaining to aspects of the visitor experience and customer service, for example wayfinding; And, finally, a consultant and the Manager of Visitor and Market research conducted a post occupancy evaluation study which consisted of touring walk-through interviews with groups of 4-8 visitors each for approximately 90 minutes each session. In this evaluation study the groups chose their own routes through the museum and their responses to the experience were recorded in note-form and by still photography by the consultant. In a summary meeting after the walkthrough the visitors were asked to reflect on their visit and to identify the three best and the three worst aspects of their experience. Finally, we encouraged people to complete a visitor comments form, and this practise still continues today.

There was a richness of information, and without it at that time we would not have been able to serve visitors as we can today. We enthusiastically recommend such timely soft openings even though we understand fully the pressures of pre-opening. From the post-occupancy evaluation study alone thirty-two high priority (or, “now”) recommendations were made, and a further 17 lower priority of “later” recommendations as well as 3 issues requiring more focused study or monitoring were identified. We were able to undertake all of the major changes prior to Day One, and this included major changes in our wayfinding kiosks and customer service, to name a couple. Combining these findings with the observations made by the external expert and staff and senior managers we learned a great deal about what the visitor experience was going to be like once we opened and the improvements we needed to make in this final window of opportunity prior to opening with regard to the facilities, services and experiences we were going to be delivering.

We also received very encouraging feedback from those who visited Te Papa as part of the Soft Openings with the exhibitions receiving very high ratings and positive comments and general indications of high levels of satisfactions with 98% of the visitors stating they would visit Te Papa again.

Since opening, Te Papa has undertaken numerous other visitor research efforts, but the soft opening post occupancy effort was central the success that followed the opening day. We have a visitor research team of three well-trained full-time staff members, and their work since has focused on comparing actual-to-projected attendance levels and attendance trends; monitoring customer satisfaction levels; front of house feedback from staff; monthly in-depth visitor profiling; and customer comments forms. More information is available simply by contacting Bill Tramosch (Director of Visitor Programmes and Services), or Christine Fitzgerald, Manager of Visitor and Market Research. Te Papa, PO Box 467, Wellington, New Zealand. Email; [billt@tepapa.govt.nz](mailto:billt@tepapa.govt.nz) or, [chrisf@tepapa.govt.nz](mailto:chrisf@tepapa.govt.nz)