

Developing an interpretive panel

How can you bring the special places that you look after to life? Will historical events fade from memory if you don't tell the stories? Do visitors want to know how or when a local landmark formed? Does a popular site need restoration? Can you get visitors to think differently about the things that surround them? Has your boss told you that he/she wants a sign and its needed now?

Where to start

Focus on what exactly it is that you want or need and then develop a plan. A plan allows you to work through all the foreseeable issues and set up a clear direction before you start on production. This means you can:

- Get agreement on the fundamentals at the start. There is nothing worse than getting half way down one road and having someone tell you that you are heading in the wrong direction.
- Use it to describe a project for funding applications.
- Give contractors clear instructions.
- Use it as a reference during production to see if you (your contractors) are on track.
- Refer back to it at the end of the process to see if your objectives were met.

But how to begin? Start by asking yourself

1. **What do I want to achieve?** Here are a few examples of typical objectives:

- To increase visitor appreciation and enjoyment of the site.
- To increase visitor understanding about a site, object or event.
- To meet visitor information needs. Do you know what your visitor information needs are?
- To encourage certain behaviours, e.g., not to disturb wildlife, to become involved in conservation projects.
- To orient visitors to a place.
- To warn people about the risks associated with a place or object.
- To highlight the hidden stories about a place (e.g. historical events, or to describe what once existed in a place).

Not all of these are interpretive (e.g. warning messages) but they can be incorporated into broader interpretive themes. A single sign shouldn't try to do more than two of these. And preferably it should just focus on one.

2. **Who is my audience?** There are two things to think about here.

Firstly: **who are your likely audiences** (e.g., those who currently, or will potentially, visit the site)? There may be more than one. Secondly: **who is your target audience?** This is the group of people you most wish to reach. Some examples of possible audiences include:

- School groups
- Overseas tourists
- The casual traveler (New Zealander)

- Coach tour parties
- The people that are trampling all the vegetation at your special site.

Imagine being at the site and talking to people about the place, object or event. Who are you talking to? What sort of things are you doing to help your listeners understand what you are saying? Are the people you want to reach listening to you? If not, why not? How can you reach out to that other group most effectively? What are their needs? Do you need to change your approach?

3. ***How can I achieve my objective?***

Is anything being done at present? Is it working? If not, why not?

Remember a sign may not be the only solution. Some other ideas might include:

- A brochure.
- A ‘real’ person on-site.
- An audio
- Interactive items (e.g. a computer, a hands-on activity)
- Education programmes or kits
- An app for mobile phones
- Living history programmes
- Doing nothing

If you decide a panel is the best option – what happens next

4. ***What is the main theme I want to get across?*** This isn’t the ‘topic’. Some examples of themes compared with topics are:

- Topic: Agriculture. Theme: Our lives depend on agriculture.
- Topic: A bridge. Themes: Ingenious engineering. A life-line to a wider world.

Your theme is the foundation block for building up your storylines. It focuses the ‘doing it’ phase (concept development, research, writing, design etc). When you have finished your plan you come back to this point to start production.

5. ***How long will this information be valid and will I need to add new information periodically?*** Is the information:

- Seasonal (e.g. will things look different in the winter).
- Temporal (e.g. is this feature just here temporarily).
- Changeable (e.g., will conditions alter with on-going management).

The expected life span of the information will influence the way you present your information and the production techniques.

6. ***Where will I be putting the sign?*** You need to think about:

- The physical setting. Will you need to develop a landscape plan at the same time? Do you want the sign to stand out or will you need to soften the look of a structure?
- The likely impacts. Will vandalism be a problem; is it exposed to the rain, sun, snow, salt?

- Expected use. Will you need to develop a structure around the site to protect the environment (e.g., kauri tree roots), is there enough space around the location for groups of people to congregate.

7. ***Is the site, feature or event that I want to talk about related to other local attractions/places of interest.*** Does it need to be linked to those attractions in some way? Will it be part of a wider site redevelopment?

If you are working on a site that is linked to others, it pays to develop a plan for the whole series before starting work on one or two of them, even if you don't have funding to produce the whole set. Likewise if your signs are part of a wider redevelopment programme make sure that they are properly accounted for. It is much easier to get funding and easier to create a sympathetic design if the signs are included as part of the package.

8. ***What resources do I have available to help develop a good sign or other interpretive media.*** Examples might include:

- People with knowledge and understanding about the site / event / object; e.g., iwi, scientists, locals.
- Reports, publications etc.
- Photographs or artwork (e.g., historic, work in progress, before and after pictures, paintings).
- People with the knowledge and skills to research and write up background information and/or a final script.
- Examples of other signs that are similar to the style you would like to see at your site. It's a good idea to collect photos of signs (good ones and bad ones).

Are these people or resources easily accessible (in-house); will there be a cost involved in accessing their information; are there issues of copyright or intellectual property rights to consider.

9. ***When do I want it to be completed?*** Be realistic about the time it will take. Things to consider include:

- How much control you need over the process and the time you have available to invest in the process (how much are you prepared to leave to contractors)?
- Staff commitments. How fast can you turn information around; will your 'experts' be available when you need them; the likelihood of production delays if materials cannot be sourced etc.
- Financial constraints (does it have to paid for within a defined timeframe).

10. ***Do I want to evaluate?***

You can evaluate the information needs of your audience, the design concept and/or the finished product. Pre-testing is time consuming and can be expensive but it can save you from making even more expensive mistakes (e.g., providing information that no one is interested in or using a design that no one likes). Evaluating the final product lets you see if you've met your objectives and gives useful feedback for future projects. Think about the scope of the project – the bigger it is the more worth while it is to evaluate. Other considerations include:

- Availability of skills/systems in house (e.g., social science advisers, training manuals etc).

- Time frame – evaluating can be time consuming.
- Are there other similar projects underway that would benefit from the results?

11. ***How much can I do?*** What is feasible? Your decision will depend upon a number of variables:

- The policies of the organisation you work for.
- Your job description.
- Your other work commitments.
- The skills that you have available in-house.
- The quality of product that you want.

You may be able to do some steps in the production process yourself or you may choose to ask an interpretation contractor/consultant to manage the entire process. There is a continuum of options:

Your organization:	Interpretive contractor:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researches information, writes text, collates illustrative material. Edits text, designs the panel and organizes production. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researches information, writes text, collates illustrative material. • Organises a production contract (if required) for the remaining work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Edits text, designs the panel and organises production.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writes an interpretation brief • Organises a production contract (if required). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researches information, writes and edits text, collates illustrative material, designs the panel and organises production.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has ideas • Organises a development and production contract (if required). • Inputs into the planning process. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Works with you to develop a project plan. • Researches information, writes and edits text, collates illustrative material, designs the panel and organises production.

Many organisations don't have the in-house skills, equipment or time to do everything themselves and work at a point somewhere along the continuum.

12. ***Writing an interpretive brief.*** Basically your brief should be based on the information collected whilst developing your plan. In addition you should include:

- A clear description of the final product.
- A schedule that defines milestones (e.g., approval of text, approval of design)
- Who will do what (and by when)
- Who signs off that the work has reached an acceptable quality standard. Where possible it is useful to define quality standards (e.g. length of text) but this can be quite difficult.
- What happens if additional work is required.
- Payment arrangements (tied to milestones).