

Using video in exhibitions

Joe Cutting, 15.01.2014

Joe Cutting shares his top tips

Video in exhibitions is often done badly. Here are some of the things that can go wrong:

1. This isn't like TV

This is the main mistake people make when putting video in galleries. Although the pictures move and the technology is similar, the gallery context is completely different and people behave in very different ways.

The main difference is in attention span. Typically people sit down on their sofa to watch a TV programme that they've planned to watch and has a particular interest for them.

There aren't many distractions – even if they switch over to another channel they can switch back immediately.

Compare this to a gallery experience. Visitors tend to come across a video by chance, they haven't chosen to watch that particular one, they're not sitting down and there are lots of other things to distract them.

This is even more of an issue with groups of people as not everyone may want to stay and watch. And if they do wander off they're unlikely to come back.

You can try to make the gallery surrounding more like a TV or cinema. Adding seating will encourage people to watch for longer, as will putting the video in an enclosed place free of other distractions.

But you can probably never get the same level of engagement with gallery video as with TV, let alone cinema.

2. Moving pictures are not enough

Unless your visitors have been brought up in caves they'll have seen a huge amount of TV and cinema, so the spectacle of moving pictures isn't going to be very exciting for them.

What is going to make the difference is the content of what you're showing so you need to decide what will be most engaging in video form.

Talking heads are easy to do but aren't that engaging for visitors. If you watch a high-quality TV programme you'll see a person talking for a few seconds so you know who they are, before it cuts to shots of something else more visually interesting.

Most people can read much faster than they speak so giving them the same information in text form actually reduces the attention span.

For more on this have a look at [Jacob Neilson's eyetracking study, Talking Head Video Is Boring Online](#).

3. People may come in at any time

One of the biggest differences with gallery video is that visitors won't necessarily watch it from the start or to the end.

If you put a title that tells viewers what the video is about at the start, then the video makes no sense if people come in later. If the video needs a title or caption to make sense, then overlay it on the footage or put it on the surrounding structure.

4. Keep the video short

This is a general rule for gallery video because of visitors' decreased attention spans, but it's particularly important when you consider that people may have come in halfway through. Ideally you need to get your main point across within 30 seconds or less.

If you provide seating then people will watch for a bit longer, but it's easy to fall into the trap of making a longer film than people want to see.

These issues can be helped by giving visitors some way of controlling when the video starts. But this merely ensures that some visitors will see the start of the video – others will still come halfway through and attention spans won't be any longer so you still need to keep it short.

5. Sound

Sound is the area where most gallery videos run into the biggest problems.

If your video has sound that will be audible in the rest of the gallery then don't run the video on a continuous loop. If you do then the video will become the soundtrack to the gallery, quickly becoming very annoying and ensuring that people don't stay long.

The way round this is to make sure that the video only starts on demand (by a sensor or play button) or by making the sound only audible to the person viewing the video.

If the video has speech then it should be subtitled. This will enable you to meet your responsibilities to [deaf and hard of hearing visitors](#). And people will be able to understand what's going on even if there's a screaming child next to them.

The two main ways to reduce the sound spillage from gallery video are through headphones or directional speakers.

Headphones can work well at stopping sound spillage but they stop group interaction. Even if you put several sets of headphones there may not be enough for everyone in the group and once people put them on they can't hear each other so they don't talk.

Another disadvantage is all gallery headphones break in time and you'll need to keep lots of spares. If you do use headphones make sure that the exhibit plays some sound at all times otherwise visitors will put on the headphones, hear nothing and assume that the exhibit is broken.

It is possible to install directional speakers that play sound so that it's only audible in a particular place.

This can work very well but the sound quality isn't always that good, especially for music. You may still get some sound spillage, but how much depends on factors such as how high the ceiling is and what your floor is made of.

Directional speakers can be expensive and installing them is a skilled job, so get an experienced AV firm to do it for you.

Sometimes directional speakers work too well and visitors aren't aware that the piece has sound because they're standing in the wrong place and can't hear anything.

6. Don't let this put you off

Good video can really bring a gallery alive. Once you've shot and edited your video it can be difficult (and expensive) to make changes if you decide that it isn't right. That's why it's important to think about these issues at the planning stage.

If you're commissioning a gallery video then make sure you discuss these issues with the production company. Most companies don't specialise in making videos for exhibitions so aren't aware of these issues either.

Video editing is a time-consuming process so it's a good idea to give them these guideline before they start rather than once they've delivered the final product.

Joe Cutting is a museum consultant and exhibit developer specialising in computer exhibits. A longer version of this guide is published on his [website](#)