



Photo: Dean McNicoll

# MAKING SENSE OF VISITOR OPINIONS

Some of the most interesting responses to the National Museum's visitor surveys are given when we ask people to say, in their own words, what general things they like or don't like about the Museum. Those spontaneous comments offer rather more insights than responses selected from a prescribed list, but of course they are correspondingly harder to quantify.

We handle the general likes/ dislikes comments in two ways. Some – the more interesting, articulate or simply typical, the ones which encapsulate a common opinion but perhaps do so more vividly than most – are transcribed and kept as Word documents. But all comments are also classified and entered in our database under a number of generic headings. In that way we preserve both the vividness of visitors' actual words, and the actual frequency of commonly stated likes and dislikes.

Checking each day's new batch of comments as the questionnaires come is a fascinating task because of the enormous range of responses and the frequently contradictory impressions of different visitors. The same exhibition or experience can be rated quite differently by different visitors, and what strongly appeals to one may happen to be what particularly annoys the other.

Here are some actual examples from interviews conducted with Museum visitors in September and October.

*On the overall subject matter:*

- > I like that it is the Australian history story.
- > The exhibits are about Australia, and not about elsewhere.

but

- > I didn't expect only Australiana.
- > The exhibits are too Australia-focused, I would have preferred more information and exhibits on world history.

*Age groups catered for:*

- > It's so family friendly.
- > Kid friendly.
- > Good for children.
- > I like the children's facilities, caters for all different ages.

but

- > It should have a child-free and pram-free day.

Subject emphasis:

- > I loved the interviews with today's Aboriginal people. Enjoyed Islander and Aboriginal artefacts, and the range of Australian history shown
- > The Aboriginal side of it all. The whole thing
- > World class displays – the Aboriginal section particularly good

but

- > Too much emphasis on the Aboriginal side of it.

How do we reconcile those very different opinions? By putting them in context – that is where the quantitative analysis of comments becomes useful. Analysis shows that positive comments greatly outnumber negative comments; those who dislike aspects of the Museum's subject matter or style, for example, are relatively few. We are also able to track the proportion of visitors who mention each factor over time.

An analysis of all the 'like' and 'dislike' statements since opening in 2001 reveals the following broad results.

*In general, what do people say they like most about the Museum?*

Building/ architecture/ structure	26%
General layout/ display/ presentation	16%
Circa Theatre	14%
Variety/ quality/ content	12%
Overall style/ feel/ modern outlook	11%
K.Space/ children & family attractions	11%

*What are the things they dislike?*

'Nothing' (i.e. everything is good)	22%
Guidance/ signage/ the map	14%
Confusing layout and flow	11%
Lighting (too dark, can't read things)	7%
Labelling/ information (not enough)	6%
Limited parking	5%

These proportions have remained fairly consistent over time. Wayfinding problems have lessened since the introduction of the new map and improved internal signage, but the building's complex layout may always offer something of a challenge to visitors. However some of them find even this a Museum plus!

- > We got lost a few times, but that doesn't matter.
- > I liked finding things in unexpected places.
- > I like getting lost in here – a chance for escape and discovery for a while. 🐾

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