BEWARE OF INTERPRETERS PACKING LITTLE IDEAS AND BIG BUDGETS

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Thank you, Greg. I want to start off by congratulating you, Pamela, and the rest of the planning and organizing committee for assembling such a diverse and interesting program for this year's conference. I've also got to tell you that aside from being flattered that you've chosen to pattern the conference theme after the title of my book, I am especially pleased to be able to address a group as important to me as the one I am looking at right now. I can tell you firsthand that Australia's interpretive tradition is known and respected in my country and throughout Europe. So when I say that it is a real pleasure to be here with you, I want you to know that I *really* mean it.   You are professionals one and all, I am flattered to have been asked to address such a prestigious group.

The point I want to get across to you this morning is simple, and it is one that interpreters all over the world are gradually accepting: Having a big budget is nice, but a big budget rarely serves the interpreter unless it is accompanied by big ideas. In fact, my experience has taught me that it is the interpreter with little ideas and big budgets (a rare but egregious combination) that people like us too often have to answer for in our quest for legitimacy and professional stature. To take this idea a little further, I also believe that it is often austerity, itself—or rather austerity-inspired innovation—that leads to the very biggest of ideas.

As counterintuitive as that may sound to some of us, I'd like to spend some time this morning explaining why I think this way, and in doing so, I'd like to do four things: First, I want to relate a personal experience that taught me a lot about the psychology of budgets. Then I'd like to share with you some of what we know about the question of "effectiveness" in interpretation and its relationship to money spent. Third, in explaining this relationship, I want to try to draw a distinction for you between the "conceptual design" of an interpretive activity or device (that is, the design of the *message*) and the "technical" and artistic design of the thing (in which decisions are made about media, materials, artwork, production and fabrication processes). The point I'll make is that it is generally the conceptual design, and not the more budget-dependent technical design, that really matters in effectiveness. And finally this morning, I'll be contrasting what I see as two broad paradigms for interpretation in the 21st century—I'll call these the "What Would be Cool to Do" paradigm and the "What Would be Smart to Do" paradigm. I hope you'll

see that although they are not mutually exclusive, the two paths are sufficiently different in where they lead us that they represent what I think is a clear choice for contemporary interpreters. You'll see also, I hope, that the things that cost the *most money* in interpretation are usually the things that are *least important* when the question of effectiveness is taken into account, and conversely, that what really counts in effective interpretation is almost always free, because you already possess it.

Interpreters Packing Little Ideas and Big Budgets—A Personal Anecdote

In 1976, I had an amazing experience as a young interpreter for the US National Park Service. It was the year of my country's bicentennial celebration, and as the public programs coordinator for the Pacific Northwest Region which included about 22 national park service areas, I had the awesome responsibility to celebrate the bicentennial in behalf of all Americans. Accordingly, and this is what was so amazing about that year, I was apportioned a budget so large that I could *not* spend it all. I tried. But I could *not* spend all of it. I can't even tell you how much I had. It never mattered to know because everyone knew that I could *not* spend it all. This has never happened again.

What did occur those 21 years ago, however, was that I spent a lot of tax dollars learning really important things about interpretation. I tried lots of different things and some of them worked pretty well (like a major exhibition in Seattle's Pacific Science Center—I had the entire Life Sciences Pavilion to work with). But some of them bombed, like a really cool laser show with special fish-eye wide-angle slides of national parks being projected on the spherical dome of what was then one of the world's first laseriums. Remember this was in the mid-1970s.

But I had the time of my life. Money was no problem. The important thing was simply to produce a lot of things, the flashier and more visibly different they were, the better. If what I produced was effective, great. But if it wasn't, that wasn't going to be the end of the world. A lot of money was on the line and I simply needed to make sure I put out *a lot* of products. So I did. This was the best education (learning through trial and *lots* of error) I could have ever imagined, and one I never could have afforded to pay for. Fortunately for me, however, the US taxpayers didn't have a say in the matter. There I was, just rolling in cash and uninhibited in what I could try. I was limited only by my

imagination about cool things I might do to celebrate 200 years of independence. Since anything and everything had the potential to be a resounding success or dismal failure, I didn't have to give a lot of thought to what I was doing. As long as I did *a lot* of it, something was bound to work out. I had found interpretive nirvana. And, yes, I was an interpreter with little ideas and a big budget.

What is "Effective Interpretation?"

I would like to think that I have evolved from those days (though I wouldn't trade them for anything). I suppose the biggest change in my point of view has been that I haven't seen a budget that big since. Austerity has a way of changing your perspective, you know. As purse strings tightened, so did my approach to things. I became concerned with the "bang for the buck," as we say in the states. The "buck" you probably know refers to the dollar. The "bang" refers to accomplishment.

Though as a graduate student, and later a professor of higher education, I have remained interested in dollars, my scholarly focus has been squarely on the "bang." Even in those carefree days of the bicentennial, I had a deep interest in knowing what "effective" communication was. I knew intuitively that it is one thing to *feel* that an interpretive service or device is "good," but how do you *know* it? How do you recognize it and be able to define its success in widely acceptable terms? On this question, I have focused my entire career as a field interpreter and now teacher and researcher. Although my journey continues primarily in cognitive and social psychology, long ago I discovered a truly extraordinary thing in the literature: a consensus! That is, I found wide agreement on what constitutes "effective" or "good" communication. To be "good," it need do only three things: (1) capture the attention of its audience, (2) maintain that attention long enough to make a point, and (3) make the point. When you think about it, what more could you ask of any communication effort? Had I been more concerned with making sure my laser show could stand up to these criteria, I might have given the taxpayers a better bang for their buck. But my ideas were much too small.

Big budgets sometimes lead to sloppy thinking. A perceived need to be flashy and colorful stems from pressure to be visible—to make the funding agency or donor organization think it got its "money's worth." Unfortunately, being flashy sometimes

becomes an end in itself and making a point ends up becoming secondary. Thus, we end up worrying only about the *first* criterion (capturing attention), but we fail to give equal consideration to doing what is necessary to make a cogent point. This is the classic case of the interpreter with little ideas. Appearance, rather than *real* communication, becomes paramount.

Little budgets, on the other hand, often cause us to think more carefully about *all three* criteria. We know from the outset that there are inherent limitations on what we can do, on the materials we can afford to buy, on the media we can afford to employ, and on the fabrication and production processes we can afford to carry out or contract. We don't waste our time contemplating courses of action we can't afford. In times of austerity, we intuitively concern ourselves with the central question that, in a perfect world, guides *all* interpretive thinking:

> "What can I do with the money I have that will impact my
> audience's point of view in desired ways?"

The question is not mundane. It is quintessential to effective interpretation—to effective communication of *any* kind. And posing such a question, even if subconsciously, is half the battle in the daily interpretive war for the hearts and minds of our audiences. Being flashy, alone, accomplishes little. But when this fundamental question defines our point of departure, suddenly, how we *think* about what we are doing—and the countless judgements and strategic decisions we make along the way—are all affected. It's a mindset you see. It's not about money or materials or processes. It's about *how* we embark on the task of communication. It's about our *mindset*.

How many of you manage interpretive programs or supervise interpreters? Here's an administrative tactic you might consider if you're brave and have reason to want to irritate your staff. Try lying to your interpreters by a factor of, say, 50 percent about the budget they have to work with. That way, you can trick them into the proper mindset from the very beginning. Then, when they've arrived at an effective conceptual design inspired by their false sense of austerity, you can let them in on the good news that their budget has just been doubled. The way I see it, this ought to increase their effectiveness twofold. The

downside, of course, is that they might not be very kind to you after that. But I think you might be pleased with what they produce. I don't know about you, but that seems like a fair trade to me, especially if you're mobile.

Too often, we judge the effectiveness of interpretation by its flashiness. This is, without doubt, the littlest of all ideas, since not a *shred* of evidence exists to suggest that flashy is better. Perhaps nowhere has this fact been more powerfully illustrated than in the world's interpretive centers and museums. Talk about a range of flashiness—I've seen everything from the Smithsonian museums in my own country and some of the finest visitor facilities all over the world with budgets of mind boggling proportions, all the way to rustic little shacks along dusty roadsides containing nothing more than poster-board exhibits. Now I am not going to say that the little "dusty" ones are always the most effective because that would not be true. But I will say that when the effectiveness of the exhibits these facilities contain is judged against the three criteria I mentioned earlier (capturing and maintaining attention, and making a point), the very best exhibits are as likely to be found in the modest, home-spun facilities as in the flashy expensive ones. Now what does that tell you?

The Role of Conceptual Design in Effective Interpretation

From an evaluative point of view, the difference lies *not* in the materials or the flashiness of artwork, lighting and technological accoutrements. The distinction between "effective" and "ineffective" lies in the conceptual design of the exhibits. Effective conceptual designs *communicate*—that is, they successfully impart themes. Now they, too, may be flashy. But they are never "just" flashy; they also communicate provocative themes. And comparatively unflashy exhibits that have powerful conceptual designs still communicate powerful messages. That, more than anything else I could tell you this morning, underscores the compelling importance of conceptual designs—that is, the strategic design of the *message*. The best designs, of course, are those that are strong conceptually *as well as* technically and artistically, because they have taken into consideration all three of the criteria we discussed earlier. But if the disciplined interpreter had to choose between having a strong conceptual design or a strong technical design, she or he would probably resist at first, but then come down on the side of a strong message—

a strong theme. Those of you who will be with me in any of the workshops I'll be conducting Thursday, Friday and Saturday will have to bear hearing this from me again and again. But that's only because I believe strong conceptual designs really *are* that important.

But if you're not particularly interested in communicating a point or theme, then all this talk about the importance of conceptual designs is probably wasted on you. You, after all, can judge your exhibits and other interpretive media solely by how much they call attention to themselves (and by extension perhaps, to *you*). That is, you can evaluate them more or less as art projects rather than as strategic communication devices. That's OK, I guess, as long as you admit it. But don't have the mindset that visual communication devices are simply personal sensory experiments with line, form, color, texture and sound and then talk about them as though they're something more. If you're going to "talk the talk" my friends, sooner or later you're going to have to "walk the walk," or the next generation of educated, discipline-thinking interpreters is going to *walk* right over you.

In this business of interpretation, increasingly, the professionals are those who "walk the walk." And I, personally, am growing weary of the classic design firm that is truly expert in visual art, but resistant to the notion that the design process must concern itself *first* with the message and the communication strategy of imparting this message to a particular audience, and then (and *only* then) with the important task of making it pretty, durable and visually appealing.

Too many of us, I think, see exhibits, signs, posters and other primarily visual media simply as art projects. This, fortunately, is changing, and I am proud (albeit bloodied and scarred) at being at the forefront of this change. So, if you'll permit me a moment of self-indulgence, I must tell you how gratifying it is to see these ideas taking hold in the minds of colleagues here in Australia, and around the world, and especially among the bright, young potentially-superstar interpreters that are just entering our profession. You *will* prevail, because the evidence is clear and it is on your side.

Being "Cool" and Being "Smart"—Two Paradigms for Interpretation in the 21st Century

       We are in the midst of a revolution in our thinking. History, I believe, will look back on interpretation in the 1980s and 90s as a sort of renaissance—a time when our paradigm changed from "What Would Be *Cool* to Do" to "What Would Be *Smart* to Do." We've been talking the last few minutes about exhibits and other primarily visual media, but what I want to say about these two paradigms ("Smart to Do" versus "Cool to Do") applies across the board to all media, whether they be self-guided (or, if you prefer, "non-personal") media like trails, exhibits, signs, posters and brochures, or personal services like talks, walks, tours, theater or puppet shows.

       In the "What Would Be Cool to Do" paradigm, interpretive planning starts from the premise that it would be cool to do something, well, really cool. Instinctively, our attention turns immediately to the media, because media are, well, cool. Then we think about cool effects (visual effects, sound effects, special lighting effects, movement, interactivity and other "bells and whistles") that we might use to capture attention. In contemporary soundbyte society, cool stuff almost always captures attention. It *has* to; attention spans are short. In this paradigm, having accomplished doing something cool leads us to consider what we see as the comparatively more straightforward (or even mundane) issue of what we want to say. But worrying about the message, you see, clearly comes *second*. And in the all-too-typical scenario, this shows in unfortunate ways. In some cases, the message is haphazardly made to conform to whatever the medium will allow (the medium determines the message), and in the worst case, the medium actually *precludes* communication (as happened in a South Carolina visitor center when "Cool-to-Do" planners decided it would be really cool to design an entire interpretive center around an enormous tree stump that would be mounted in the center of the carpet of the exhibit room. The building was constructed, the exhibits—more or less tying into a story about the tree trunk that would be located in the center of the room—were designed, fabricated and installed, and then the day came when the trunk was to be brought in and mounted. Unfortunately, its width was *three times* the size of the largest door. What did they do? Exactly! They had to tear out an entire exterior wall of the then completed interpretive

center in order to get the trunk in.) Now, this is only one example of what can happen when we become so preoccupied with the media that they become the end in themselves, but it *did* happen. My point is simply that the media, while critically important in communication design, should not be our first concern as they are in the "What Would Be Cool to Do" paradigm.

I must add here another characteristic of this paradigm. Not surprisingly, a common result of interpretive plans based on the "What Would Be Cool to Do" paradigm is that they sit on shelves and collect dust. That's because when the people who produced those plans leave to go do cool stuff elsewhere, somebody else arrives who has different ideas about what would be cool to do. And so they toss out the old cool stuff and develop their own plans.

The "What Would Be Smart to Do" paradigm does not ignore the central importance of media selection and technical/artistic design in communication. It merely postpones them, giving primary attention to the conceptual design—or design of the message—at the outset. The reasoning behind this derives from the planner's recognition that the interpretive program is a tool among many tools in a larger management context. Such planners realize that their interpretive services and facilities serve a purpose that can only be justified in terms of their agency's or institution's mission. They ask themselves, "What are we trying to *accomplish* through our interpretive offerings—what are the desired outcomes we are trying to produce—that will help the organization accomplish its mission?" They ask themselves, "What would be smart (in the strategic or tactical sense) to do in our interpretive program in order to produce these outcomes?" "What should we be saying to our audiences in order to achieve these things?" This very question strikes at the heart of conceptual planning. It ponders the messages or themes that the organization should be communicating to different audiences in time and space in order to achieve outcomes related to the organization's mission or charge. In other words, it asks a familiar question:

> "What can I do with the money I have that will impact my
> audience's point of view in desired ways?"

Along with the "Smart to Do" paradigm come a number of intuitive inferences: (1) since different organizations have different missions, we'd expect the form and content of their interpretive programs also to be different, (2) since the importance of different audiences will vary from organization to organization, we'd expect the focus, media and programming of interpretive services also to vary, (3) since different audiences have different interests, tendencies and preferences, we'd expect the communication approach to vary from audience to audience, and (4) since different audiences relate to the resource or protected values of an area in different ways, we'd expect that the themes being communicated to these audiences would also vary —for example, from a management point of view, we'd be smart to give some audiences regulatory messages while others may need indoctrination into *why* the resources are being protected in the first place.

These are the kinds of questions the "Smart to Do" paradigm grapples with at the earliest stages of the interpretive planning process. Oh sure, we, too, are fascinated by the media, materials and the art of it all, and we are certainly not ignoring these important considerations. In fact, the artists and media technicians are at the interpretive planning table with all of us from day one. We are a *team*, and it is essential that *all* of us understand *every* issue pertaining to the design—both conceptual and technical. But in this paradigm, we are not yet ready to turn the artists and technicians loose. That's because *they* are not yet ready. Until the conceptual design of the message has been agreed upon; until, as my colleagues at Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument in the US say, "there is *magic* in the message," can the artists and technicians bring their genius to bear on the project in a purposeful way. (And at this point, of course, we want to think about ways to be *very* cool in selection of media, materials and artistic design, but within the constraints of the budget we have to work with. Yes, appearance *does* matter, but it matters most once a strong conceptual design has been developed.) The key here is that we have been patient, as a team, to work through the conceptual design process before concerning ourselves directly with the things that are more money-dependent.

Here I feel I must interject some kind of defense for the artists in the room who might otherwise feel as though I am casting blame their way. Nothing could be further from the truth. The problem with the "Cool to Do" paradigm is that the artists either are thrown unknowingly to the forefront of a process that is not yet ready for them, or more

typically, they are not involved early enough in the conceptual design process. The artist in me knows this is correct because I have experienced it myself many times. I have had to produce soundtracks for multimedia programs that were based on truly awful scripts; I have produced designs for panels and wayside exhibits after unwieldy volumes of esoteric text had already been approved; and once I actually had to prepare a brochure for an organization *before* anyone even knew what the topic would be (they were going to fit "some words" in around the design elements!).

Artists and technicians need to be a part of the team throughout the *entire* design process, not just brought in when it's time to add the "bells and whistles." Does any of us, and here I am speaking especially to the artists and technicians in the room, like to work in isolation concerned only with our small piece of the puzzle? Aren't we more satisfied and productive when we see the strategic purpose of our piece in the context of the whole? Many times, I think, artists and technicians are set up to fail by agencies who don't bring them into the process early enough to be part of the conceptual design process. The insights and creative ideas they might bring to the table are not appreciated because they aren't seen as essential until it is time to talk about typography, layout and color, or sound and photography. In the "Smart to Do" paradigm, *all* of us—contractors, subject matter specialists, interpreters, artists, technicians, writers—work together on the entire concept from day one.

There is another far more compelling reason that I am contrasting the "Cool to Do" and "Smart to Do" paradigms today, and the psychologist in me wants to immerse you here in an esoteric body of theory and research into human cognition and behavioral decision making that would convince you of just how simple the choice between the two paradigms is. The trouble is that in the few minutes we have here today, I probably would succeed only in putting you to sleep. That's why I wrote my book, *Environmental Interpretation—A Practical Guide for People with Big Ideas and Small Budgets*, the way I wrote it. (Heck, that took almost four years and I know you wouldn't last through even the first year today.) But if you look closely, you will see that the book is a sugar-coated rendition of social and cognitive psychology applied to interpretation about the natural and cultural environments.

The premise of the book is that nearly two centuries of psychological research have shown us that effective communication (that is, communication that does those three things: capturing and maintaining attention, and getting across a point) has four defining characteristics or qualities that I call the cornerstones of the interpretive approach to communication. Put simply, effective communication is enjoyable, relevant, organized and thematic. Although the four are not mutually exclusive, the first two of these qualities (being enjoyable and relevant) tend to specialize in getting and maintaining the attention of a noncaptive audience (an audience that doesn't have to pay attention), whereas the second two qualities (being organized and thematic) tend to specialize in getting the message across to an audience.

My point for telling you this is not to sell books, but rather to make a point—the same point that inspired me to write the thing in the first place. That point is that putting these four qualities in your interpretive programs or in any communication effort *costs nothing*. In other words, I am saying that the "Smart to Do" paradigm is an inexpensive paradigm. It focuses our attention on the intelligent and creative application of our knowledge about human communication to achieve desired outcomes, that in turn, correspond to different audiences that are important to us and our organization's mission. If I am a tour operator, offering my clients interpretive experiences that are enjoyable, relevant, organized and thematic makes a lot of sense because they can create satisfied customers, generate repeat business and positive word-of-mouth advertising, and it can make me a lot of money. If my organization exists to preserve the remnants of an indigenous culture, offering interpretive services that are enjoyable, relevant, organized and thematic will impact the point of view of people whose moral and/or financial support I must have to be successful. And if part of my organization's mission is the provision of satisfying leisure experiences, I can tell you that well-designed and intelligently programmed interpretive programs will constitute a centerpiece of my approach. Putting these four qualities into each and every interpretive service need not cost a lot of money. In fact, its only real costs are my time and creative energy. The media and materials I use and the fabrication and production processes I employ *will*, of course, be limited by what I can afford to spend. But it doesn't matter whether I have a lot or only a little to spend on these things; I am still going to make sure that every interpretive service and device I put

"out there" is *enjoyable* to the audience it is intended to reach, *relevant* to their lives, *organized* for easy processing, and *thematic* through-and-through in its conceptual design. Thinking this way constitutes the heart and soul of the "Smart to Do" paradigm. Seen in this light, "new-age" interpreters envision their task not as money-dependent, but as creativity-dependent. I hope you are among them.

Toward Professionalism in Interpretation—A Concluding Word on Big Ideas and Small Budgets

I started off this morning making a couple of bold statements. I said that having a big budget is nice, but a big budget can be a counterproductive thing if it is not spent by interpreters with big ideas. I also mumbled something about the creative energy that tight purse strings can create—"austerity-inspired innovation" I called it. Whether or not you can stomach these observations—and whether you see them as bold assertions or simply as meek statements of the obvious—I hope you will at least consider this: I've been hanging around interpreters for a long time and I've had the good fortune in more than twenty countries of the world to hear about their successes and, of course, about their frustrations. And when it comes to frustrations, the most common complaint is that they just can't do their jobs without more money. The funny thing is, I hear this as much from people who have six-digit budgets as I do from interpreters who have only two digits to work with. While the desire for larger budgets is understandable (and there is no denying that money helps an interpretive program) I am deeply troubled when lack of money is used as the reason for doing something that is under-inspired or even nothing at all . My philosophy is that true "professional" interpreters are like liquids—they take the shape of their containers. Whatever the constraints are, they acknowledge them and simply get on with their work inside the boundaries and limitations they have to deal with. *Their* work is much too important to them to let anything get in the way of it. To them, lack of money isn't an obstacle to doing their jobs, nor to doing them well. It is merely an inconvenience.

More than mere money, it is an understanding of *how* communication works, and a practical knowledge of how to apply it, that lie at the root of most effective interpretive programs. Certainly financial resources permit us to hire specialists and to use flashier and more durable materials—and these are *nice*. But in twenty-five years of thinking about

interpretation, observing and practicing it, I do not recall even one instance in which a mediocre communication strategy (or conceptual design as I have been calling it today) was saved from mediocrity by its flashiness. I do, however, remember *many* captivating walks, talks and demonstrations that required nothing more than the interpreter's time and creative energy. And I recall many low-budget exhibits, low-budget audiovisual programs and low-budget self-guided trails and wayside panels that were *undeniably excellent* when judged against those three criteria we have been considering today. For whatever it might be worth to you, my observation has been that the biggest difference between interpreters who achieve excellence and those who achieve mediocrity is their knowledge of *how* to communicate, not the size of their budgets.

This is the philosophy that has guided my work and my teaching since that time when I was, for a while anyway, an interpreter with little ideas and a dangerously big budget. My goodness, what might I be able to do with that budget now that my ideas have grown? What might *any of us* in this room be able to do with *any* size budget if we are guided by the "Smart to Do" paradigm and armed with big ideas for powerful conceptual designs? That answer I will leave to you because when you look back months and years from now on the work you are doing today, only *you* will be able to make that determination. I'll wager you this though: I'll bet the satisfaction you enjoy won't be nearly as dependent on the size of the *budget* you had as it will be on the size of the *ideas* you had between your ears.

Yes, my friends, beware of interpreters packing little ideas and big budgets. I really doubt you'd like being one. Not for long anyway. And your audiences, the people your work promises to enrich and enlighten, will like it even less.

Greg, Pamela and others: I want to thank you again for your kind invitation to come to Australia and to be a part of this important event. And to all of you, thank you for your kind attention. I sincerely wish each and every one of you the success you deserve in your important work. And if the breadth and depth of this year's conference is any indication, I can tell you that interpretation in Australia is in *very* good hands—because it is based on some *very* big ideas.

Enjoy the conference. Thanks.