



(Far left) Antenna's Gauguin app for Tate Modern; (left) BarZ's GoExplore Travel & Tour Guides; (right) Dataton's discreet Pickup audioguide offers excellent sound quality and ease of use

SMART DECISIONS

With the sales of mobile devices increasing, and downloadable apps becoming more popular at attractions, Kathleen Whyman asks the experts what impact this is having on the audioguides industry

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a marketing tool, encouraging physical visits or preparing for a visit. It allows the user flexibility and enables the operator to communicate to people after their visit.

Downloadable content to a mobile device can suit all types of attractions, depending on its interpretation or outreach goals, but it can work particularly well for outdoor sites that are often unstaffed and unable to offer dynamic forms of interpretative content.

Despite the leaps forward in technology and software, the audioguide is here to stay. A bespoke, purpose-built handheld multimedia player meets many objectives from interpretation and accessibility to technical simplicity and peace-of-mind maintenance. Traditional audioguides can also be particularly good for very popular temporary exhibitions where carefully paced content can regulate and choreograph visitor flow and help to avoid overcrowding or bottlenecks.

In an ideal scenario, attraction operators will offer both. Then, some of the content produced for an on-site guide can be reused in other forms, for example through a downloadable smartphone application, which is complementary to the client's main interpretation channel and meets other objectives, such as marketing."

"The purpose of the audioguide is to learn more, satisfy our curiosities, gain a deeper understanding and discover something new. None of that has changed. What has changed is that the term audioguide doesn't adequately describe the product or industry anymore.

We're in the business of creating engaging experiences for visitors, whether physical or virtual. To do that you have to take into account what the person is seeing and experiencing around them at the moment they're digesting that content. So, for us, the experience design approach becomes very different for an on-site experience compared to a remote one, such as a smartphone application.

Mobile devices allow operators to push their message and voice out to people who might not be able to visit their attraction. Content digested in this way can be seen as

PHOTO: PIOTR MAJEWSKI, MOOV

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"The increasing availability of personal devices represents a tremendous opportunity for the cultural interpretation industry and visitor attractions themselves. The cost of providing tours onto personal devices is generally lower than providing tours on rental players, and the visitor has a tour to keep and use again if they revisit. Plus, through a mobile phone, an attraction can connect to visitors before and after they actually walk through the gates.

However, the visitor has to download the tour, which can take time, depending on the file size, and the number of other people trying to download the tour. They might

not have enough space for another app on their phone or be concerned about poor battery life. It can be expensive too, especially if the visitor is roaming from another country. And if the operator offers a free wireless network to avoid these roaming charges, they risk other users piggy-backing on the network, clogging it up, slowing it down, and therefore offering a poor experience to their visitors.

Traditional rental devices have the advantage that they're used within a controlled environment where hardware and content changes can be planned and executed simply. They are reliable, have two sources of power, in case one runs out, and also have a much lower lifetime cost.

What's right for an individual attraction depends very much on the nature of the site. Ungated environments are ideal for personal devices as 'rental and return' without gates to funnel and control traffic is too expensive. Also, success is

measured in absolute numbers – how many people download the tour, not the percentage that do. Gated environments care about the percentage of people who take the tour because they work hard to build great content and want the maximum number of people to take it. More prosaically, if they attract any public funding it looks bad to say they have a great tour, but it's only available to the 20 per cent of ABC1s who have an iPhone 4. Even for more commercially-minded operators, as it stands today, offering players for rental is still the best bet for generating a financial return in the short-term.

For this reason, although the penetration of personal devices will rise fast and although smartphone users will increasingly take the tour on their own phones, not all visitors will have or will want to use



Imagineear's devices are designed specifically for use in attractions with two headphone sockets, two sources of power and a lower lifetime cost

their own device. Gated sites will therefore be obliged to source an alternative rental device for some time. Traditional audioguides won't become defunct for a long while yet, and smartphones will never be 100 per cent of the solution, but over time, the market served by rental devices will become smaller and the providers will be forced to consolidate or go out of business. While there are challenges for us in all of this, the opportunities are so much bigger."