

A museum: a place for communication and events

Good Morning, dear colleagues.

It is a pleasure to be here today and to have the chance to tell you something about my work.

One evening, during an event, a visitor who was admiring the museum's wonderful architecture, asked me if I would be willing to pay amusement tax to work in a place like that. I was very surprised by his question because I had always thought of my job as hard work, not really as amusement.

But, of course, I was pleased that the visitor felt so happy in the beautiful room with its special atmosphere. He was right of course. A museum is a wonderful place to work, a communicative meeting point and it is never boring.

And that brings me to the title of our conference today "Museums, do they have to be boring?" And the simple answer is no, they don't, and that is especially true for printing museums or museums for communication. They are definitely not boring, neither for the visitors nor for the staff.

And why?

Because we can learn something about our cultural memories. Museums offer visitors the chance to communicate as well as to experience and take part in many activities, for example printing processes. The fact that visitors can be active means that some of these museums, for example technical museums, have a high entertainment factor. They open a window on the past and on the history of communication. And, because there are people and objects with stories to tell, they also provide answers to everyday questions. Or to put it in a nutshell: museums are very special places, places which are meeting points in many different ways.

Before I tell you something about my work at the Museum for Communication in Berlin, please allow me to give you a brief overview of some of the discussions which took place in the 1980s and 90s. This will help us to understand our position today better.

At that time, there was movement in the professional world of museums in Germany. For example the first historical theme-exhibitions worked with wide themes and settings, which bound the exponents in contents as well as colour and space concepts. The visitors were so enthusiastic that there were long queues to enjoy this new kind of exhibition.

Soon there was a call for different kinds of museum, new ideas und concepts for everyday culture and industry and for technical museums. The aim was to give people, especially young people, a better understanding of their daily life. This resulted in a new generation of museums, including the science centres as hands-on-museums with phenomenal experiments to improve public understanding of science and humanities.

There were a lot of debates in museum conferences concerning different themes such as 'stage management', 'museums as a place for learning', 'visitor analysis', 'colours in museums', 'politics and museums', 'events', 'science museums versus technical museums' and about the "right" museums. These discussions also took place between the local authorities, the founders and politicians. They were triggered off by the big historical museums which normally have bigger problems showing historical content and historical exponents, for example showing economic, financial or political history in a 3-D-dimension. They often used special settings to display their exhibitions.

To sum up and to put it very simply, I would like to say that the result of all these

debates and changes has been a different attitude to forms of presentations since the 1990s. And this is reflected in the number of visitors. Budget cuts and more economic pressure from the local authorities also played an important role. Museums were forced to open up more and to practise a flexible, more communicative pedagogy. Thanks to the development of the internet and new media, visitors' expectations and their way of seeing things have changed completely, and this had to be taken into account. We have to accept too that, unlike in the past, visitors today don't like taking a chronological route through a museum. They prefer to surf through the rooms as they do in the internet. They are not satisfied with technical explanations alone. They want answers to the following questions:

When was an object created?

What does it tell us?

Why was it developed?

How was it made?

Which context does it belong to?

Blaise Pascal (1623–1662, Paris) once wrote, 'It is not what we see, but how we see that determines the value of what we have seen.'
– And I fully support this view.

If we want to take the work of communication in an information society seriously, we have to open our minds to new forms of presentation and to 'staging' our collections. Contextual displays, thematic exhibitions, educational programmes and activities as well as opening the museums in the evenings for special events – all these measures help to encourage regular visitors to remain faithful to our museums, and they help us to win new visitors.

At the end of the 1990s, our Foundation of Post and Telecommunication reacted to these new demands. We had a paradigm change from a chronological way of presenting the history of the Post to the new guiding principles of how to present the larger history of human communication.

On 1st January 1995 – fourteen years ago – the German government passed a law and created the Museum Foundation Post and Telecommunication with its main office in Bonn. At that time, this was a rather unusual public-private partnership in the museum world and a model of how to fund and manage museums. The Foundation resulted from the separation of the Post into Postbank, Post and Telekom, after the German Federal Ministry of Postal Services was disbanded. The Federal Ministry of Finance is now the supervisory authority and patron of the collection. The Post's successors, the companies Deutsche Post and Deutsche Telekom, are the new founders who finance the budget for the annual running costs of the Museum Foundation.

The aim of this new umbrella institution is to preserve the cultural heritage of Germany's postal services. The four museums in Berlin, Frankfurt, Nuremberg and Hamburg, and the Philately Archive in Bonn, are directly administered by the Foundation. In the early years, the four museums were renamed 'Museum for Post and Communication', with the name of the respective city added at the end. In 1998, the name was shortened to 'Museum for Communication'. The four museum directors had the task of reorganizing the museums. The aim was to anchor them firmly in today's new world of communication, information and science. This

was achieved by an innovative concept of annual changing thematic exhibitions, new educational services and effective PR initiatives.

The first of the four Museums for Communication to be reopened with a new exhibition was the museum in Berlin in 2000. This was after the museum building had been comprehensively restored and modernized. Since May 2007, I have directed it, parallel to my responsibility as Director General of the Foundation.

The Berlin museum was the first postal museum worldwide. It was built in 1898 in the architectural style of the 19th century to present treasures collected since 1872 to a broad public. The aim was to serve 'national education'. In 2000, after extensive restoration work, the beautiful palatial building regained most of its old splendour, but contained new messages. This new museum concept resulted in a shift from presenting technical developments and functions to showing how people used and use the old and new forms of communication. This is supplemented by an educational programme geared to media competence and dealing with new questions.

Outside, the building interacts with neon writings and a sound installation to attract passers-by. Day and night views complement each other. At night, the building is flood-lit in blue – blue as the symbol of science and technology, but also of distant shores and a meditative mood. And, of course, the colour blue is also a reference to the Blue Mauritius in our treasure vault!

Neon writings outside and inside the building indicate the different themes and represent playful associations with the context. This is

not arranged in chronological order, but is based on personal associations.

The paradigm change from a postal to a communications museum was radical. It was presented in six exhibition sections, which now communicate the central themes of communication and aspects of the history of telecommunication. Visitors are confronted by these forms of communication on three gallery levels.

The first, bottom level offers them the 'hands-on' and enjoyable experience of using a number of interactive stations, which serve as interfaces between humans and machines. Here, visitors are welcomed by a 'reception committee' of three robots from the Fraunhofer Institute, each programmed with different speech functions. The first robot says, 'Come in', the second, 'Well then' and the third 'Play with me', which is why children like this one the best.

The theme galleries offer visitors intuitive experiences by confronting them with many different subjects from the history of communication. These include space and time, local-global-glocal or accelerating the transportation of goods, passengers and information. Behind these galleries are the collection rooms which contain a selection of items from the museum's huge collection. All this offers visitors a third angle on communication.

The six main exhibition themes are:

How does the use of communication media change the perception of space and time?

How does the acceleration of passenger and goods transport

change social processes?

How is news protected?

How has the profiling of institutions and nations changed?

How has the media changed the way wars are fought and perceived?

What role do the mass media play in our society?

The restoration of the museum included a new 'treasure vault' in the basement, which contains some of the highlights of communication.

Now let me show you some recent additions to the permanent collection of the Berlin museum. For example, we now have an English-language multimedia guide in the form of an i-phone-touch. We also organize up to twelve special exhibitions per year on themes which help to strengthen our profile as a place for communication. We are all very creative and are constantly adding to our permanent exhibition which was installed eight years ago. We are very pleased with the sensuous redesign of these displays developed by the staff at the Nuremberg Museum for the permanent exhibition. This new concept could be entitled 'Hearing, seeing, writing as part of a global world'. It will be opened next year, and you are all warmly invited to the opening.

We did not forget the commercial aspects and the need to make the time visitors spend at the museum a memorable experience. In 2008, we implemented a new museum shop concept in Berlin and Frankfurt. The shops now sell a broad range of souvenirs and gifts, books and catalogues.

Early in 2009 we installed a new internet portal. Our staff members worked closely together to produce the website, which offers online visitors an overview of the broad range of exhibitions and activities we put on every year.

All four museums for communication offer interesting educational programmes. In 2008 a great number of visitors, especially groups, took part in these. For example, the Children's Workshop of the Frankfurt museum welcomed many participants. The educational offers include the following: a course for the elderly on the use of the internet; introductions to the new media and to blogging; internet driving licence; casting events; Lukas' Land for Explorers – Experiments with Light. There are also courses on historic techniques such as lithography (parallel to a Daumier exhibition) or Children's Sundays and the 'Long Night of the Museums' events with special programmes and co-operative projects. All of these have attracted thousands of participants.

This brings us back to the museum as a place for communication in a general sense, meaning the museum as a meeting place for professional events or 'special events' in the evenings.

Immediately after the reopening of the museum in Berlin in 2000, we started to rent out the atrium and museum restaurant for evening events, in partnership with a well-known Berlin restaurant. Since 1st February 2009, we have rented out the restaurant to Sarah Wiener, who intends to convert it into a Viennese Coffeehouse by the summer of this year. In addition to award ceremonies, get-together evenings, partnership meetings, press launchings, film screenings,

blogger meetings and competitions, it is mainly company events which provide the museum every year with a high income from rentals and donations for our day-to-day operations. We are of course very happy about this, as it shows our patrons – who have to think in terms of operational costs – that in the past four years we have increased our own contribution to 2.5 per cent of the budget.

Ladies and gentlemen, I hope I have succeeded today in showing you that life in our museum is never boring. It is always our personal attitude to our work, and the pleasure we take in planning the contents of our exhibitions and our special events which bring our work alive and make it so much fun. We sincerely hope that our visitors will experience this too and take this feeling home with them. Such positive feelings would not be possible without the dedication and ideas of our staff. I would like to thank each and every one of them for their work. And, of course, ladies and gentlemen, a special thanks to all of you too.