

Nov 04, 2016 by *Jian (Jay) Wang*

Creating a Nation-brand Experience at Shanghai Expo ^[1]

The national pavilions at the Expo are, in essence, a themed, branded environment, that aims to convey a positive and distinctive narrative about a country. So, how is the mundane space of a pavilion transformed into a stylized and, for some countries, a spectacular location that gives it meaning, identity and, above all, resonance with visitors? The pavilions being a field of cultural production, they pursue a wide range of communication approaches to create and deliver an ultimate nation-brand experience.

From texts and visuals, to experiential

At the Shanghai Expo, one can easily find communication tactics anywhere from the rudimentary display of objects and exhibits, to sophisticated multimedia presentations and engagement. Quite a few pavilions showcase original art works and treasured artifacts brought from their home country. But if wait time to get inside a pavilion is a measure of popularity, visitors seem to clearly favor the more experiential and entertaining approach over the mere informational and educational.

To provide a compelling visitor experience, pavilions are attentive to the details in creating an atmosphere – a “hyper-reality,” so to speak – through spatial design, layout, lighting, sound, and many other communicative devices on the premise. Like in most brand engagement situations, the conventions of communication are based on the two senses of sight and sound. At some pavilions (e.g., France), attempts are also made to appeal to the other senses of touch, smell and taste, in hopes of providing a distinctive, memorable experience. Others make innovative use of a familiar tactic, such as the immersive IMAX movie at the Saudi Arabian Pavilion, which takes communication impact to a whole new level.

Low involvement vs. high involvement

Visitor involvement in this context refers to the engagement of physical action in the visitors’ experiencing of a pavilion. A low-involvement experience would include walking around the pavilion to see the displays and exhibits, watching a theatrical performance (e.g., South Korean Pavilion), or enjoying a cinematic show (e.g., Thai Pavilion). It is, more or less, a passive experience.

Meanwhile, many pavilions have built in features that are action-oriented, inviting and eliciting visitor participation during the tour. Visitors need to engage in certain physical behavior in order to gain a complete experience. Many pavilions opt for using, for instance, interactive devices (e.g., touch screens, mobile technologies) to engage visitors. Others have unconventional approaches, such as the “power ball” in the German Pavilion that moves with the sound made by the visitors, and the electricity-generating floor visitors can step on in the Japan Pavilion

Self-directed vs. “controlled”

Communication inside the pavilions can also be viewed from the perspective of whether visitor experience is self-directed or “controlled.” In a self-paced experience, visitors have the freedom to spend as much or as little time as they want to in any part of the pavilion, not much different from visiting a museum. At the Shanghai Expo, most visitors appear to choose a quick walk-through of the pavilion, without taking the time to attend to any content detail.

Some pavilions, on the other hand, offer a more “controlled” experience by programming what visitors will see and for how long. This is typically done by way of IMAX or other types of timed presentations. For instance, in the United Arab Emirates Pavilion, there are three sequenced movie presentations in the different sections of the pavilion. Such an approach ensures message exposure to a captive audience. It certainly also makes practical sense in light of the daunting challenges in crowd management due to the staggering number of visitors at the current Expo.

Level of personal contact

Another dimension of communication inside a pavilion is the level of personal interaction allowed between pavilion staff members (those from the countries they represent rather than local Chinese hires) and visitors (or “guests” for some pavilions). As one of the student ambassadors at the US Pavilion aptly put it, such contact is what public diplomacy is truly all about – people-to-people interaction.

Although some may view this type of arrangement as “performative labor” (like in a Disney amusement park), it does provide an opportunity for communication that is not simply about advocacy and persuasion, but also has the potential for a genuine two-way dialog. Aside from the physical attributes of a pavilion, and its displays and program offerings, this human aspect of pavilion communication is no less important to creating an enriching visitor experience.

It is an alluring idea to use the venue of a pavilion to brand and improve a country’s image and reputation. Although no one mode of communication is preferred over the other (for it all depends on audience, objectives and context), the Expo experience is by and large impressionistic. As such, cramming too much information into a packed pavilion doesn’t lend to experiential impact. What needs to be better understood is what tactics help to enhance visitors’ sensory enjoyment, but more importantly, what will ultimately appeal to their heart.
