

ICMM 2009: Understanding Change – coping with Uncertainty  
Session 1: Audiences  
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## **The Sea Stallion Experiment**

The title of this conference: "Understanding Change – coping with uncertainty" could have been the headline of the project I'm going to talk about: The Trial Voyage with a Viking Longship from Roskilde to Dublin and return in 2007 – 08.

This voyage, undertaken by the Sea Stallion and its crew, created an overwhelming public interest.

The Trial Voyage was covered daily by the media. It inspired comic strips, comment drawings and a satire in the Danish national morning-radio. BBC broadcasted from on board the ship, kept a blog on the BBC news webpage, and produced a documentary on the voyage. The story was on the front page in countries as far away as China, India and Australia.

And the Danish Ambassador to China claimed that the man on the street in China associated two things with modern Denmark: The drawings of Mohammed - and the Sea Stallion.

When the Sea Stallion arrived in Dublin in 2007, the entire town was engaged in the reception, and the event was covered on wide screen on Times Square in New York. It simply rocketed!

In Denmark and Ireland the ship has been used as a national symbol. It was incorporated into the canon of culture as one of twelve examples of excellent Danish craftsmanship and design. And it came out on stamps and coins.

Subsequently The Sea Stallion has covered the front page of several publications – and the red-and-yellow striped sail has become a new icon of the Vikings.

In the following I will in short describe the project, and I will try to relate the success to the changing audience.

### **The project**

The trial Voyage was the culmination of the most ambitious experiment ever undertaken by the Viking Ship Museum in the field of maritime archaeology.

It was a research- and communication project, aiming to create and communicate new knowledge on Viking long ships and society. The project is based on the reconstruction of Skuldelev 2, a 30 metre long warship built in Dublin in 1042, and now on exhibit in the Viking Ship Museum in Roskilde.

The initial reconstruction of the ship began in 1996, resulting in a reconstruction model in the scale 1:10, exhibited in the museum.

In 2000 – 2004 the full scale reconstruction was built at the museum boat yard. The visitors of the museum could follow the building process, and the project was described in television programmes, magazines and newspapers.

In 2004 the Danish queen named and launched the ship in the presence of Danish and Irish ministers, several ambassadors and 15.000 museum visitors. The event had massive media coverage, and was transmitted to 52 million television seers from all over the world.

In other words: The Sea Stallion was already well established in public consciousness, when the Trial Voyage began in 2007. The previous phases of the project had generated an excitement to build upon.

### **The communication plan**

The communication plan was based directly on the research plan, aiming to communicate the Trial Voyage and the research process in real time.

But it also playfully followed our dreams of what could be fun and fantastic. It therefore contained a diversity of events, expressions and experiences that may be described within three tracks or aspects:

First: The research aspect that invited the audience to share our curiosity and to follow our data collection, reflections and discussions. And that gave meaning to the Voyage.

Second: The human or social aspect, inviting to identification with the modern crewmembers.

Third: The artistic aspect inviting the open mind to other ways of perception.

### **The aspect of research**

In the archaeological experiment, the reconstruction represents:

- A hypothesis, reflecting our interpretation of the original ship and its missing parts.
- An opportunity to obtain basic knowledge of this type of vessel, the Viking longship.
- An 'experimental laboratory', allowing us to investigate the ship and her crew with respect to function, organisation, logistics, etc.

The research plan has had three overall objectives:

- To test the reconstruction: the hypothesis of the original ship
- To examine the seaworthiness, sailing qualities and travelling speed
- To investigate the functions, organisation and logistics of the ship and her crew

To full fill these objectives, we have tried the Sea Stallion under realistic conditions in the waters, for which the original ship was built: The Irish Sea and the North Sea. 2.482 nautical miles have been covered along the routes employed for journeys between Denmark and Ireland in the Viking Age. The Voyage has been recorded by electronic data logging, logbooks, diaries, film and photos.

### *Digital communication: The website*

The ambition was to communicate the Trial Voyage and the research process in real time. This was, for obvious reasons, a challenge since the ship was moving around far from the museum and far from the audience. It was therefore early on decided to use the website as the main platform for communication.

The website contained a vast amount of information on the project, on Viking Age longships and on Viking Age history. It gave access to educational material, films and photos. And it was our major news channel.

The most frequented page was the goggle map, showing the actual position of the ship. Data from the electronic data logger on board the Sea Stallion were transmitted to the website every ten minutes, making it possible to follow the voyage. The distance covered was visible as a red track, and the actual position was shown by an icon of the ship. The icon gave access to information on speed, course, temperature and other data related to the navigation of the ship.

The logbook and the diaries kept for research purposes were published on the site, and gave the audience a glimpse into the questions, the observations and the reflections related to the voyage and the research process. Scholars, craftsmen and sailors with a special interest and competence relevant for the project were invited to join the discussion and the reflections in the Armchair comments. Whenever a diary or a comment was published, it was shown as an icon on the goggle map.

It was not an easy task to run the website. During the voyage from Roskilde to Dublin in 2007 all involved in the communication were part of the crew on board the Sea Stallion and had to take part in the four hour shifts. The rain was pouring down in what turned out to be the wettest summer in decades, and created severe problems with the electronic equipment. At the same time it turned out to be difficult to connect to the internet along the remote coastlines of Scotland.

In 2008 a communication office was therefore set up on board the accompanying ship. It was manned by our communication officer, a journalist, a video journalist, a photographer and a web-designer. This improved the production and the updating of material, and it made it possible to supplement the diaries with daily updates on video pod casts.

The website became a great success. During the voyages – 13 weeks in total – the website had more than one million hits. The visits were most frequent in relation to the departures and the arrivals, but also in relation to special circumstances like the crossing of the North Sea.

But was our ambition fulfilled? Did we get our message regarding research, Viking longships and Viking Age across??

If we are looking into the number of visits during the six weeks of voyage in 2008 we get a picture:

The front page, showing the actual position of the ship on the goggle map, was the most frequented page with almost half a million hits. This is not surprising, since this would be the place to follow the progress of the voyage on a regular basis.

From the goggle map people went to the diaries and the video podcasts – more than 100.000 hits on these pages illustrates the interest to get more information on the voyage, the research processes and life on board.

It seems that the fascination of the voyage also created an interest in the material concerning longships and Viking Age history – and even in the hard core navigational data – with almost 60.000 hits.

Based on these numbers I will say that the message came through.

After the voyage the webpage has been rearranged, and the pattern has changed. The material concerning longships and Viking Age history is now very popular as educational material.

#### *The Sea Stallion and its crew*

During the voyage the Sea Stallion and the crew went to shore to rest and to get fresh supplies. Because of the webpage and the media, the local communities along the coast were well aware of their chance to harbour this exclusive visitor. Some tried to attract the ship by offering parties and special treatment of the crew and every where, the ship and the crew were welcomed with hospitality and interest.

For a little local community it was a challenge to host 65 people in need of bathrooms, showers, sleeping shelter and provisions. In some places the crew had to wait for the wind in days. It then turned out to be a challenge to occupy 65 restless and impatient crewmembers - and it is easy to imagine how things could get out of hand, when a fleet of several hundred young warriors had to wait on a shore for days and weeks.

The ship and the crew were the most impressive card to play in the communication of the Trial Voyage. The ship could be experienced directly as a fully equipped and functional unit with all the signs of use and life on board. It could be seen, touched, smelled, and it was possible to get on board, talk to the crewmembers and imagine how it would be to live and to work in the crowded space, to sleep on deck, to use the “toilet” etc.

An exhibition was placed on land, telling about the Viking Age, Viking Long Ships and the Trial Voyage.

The crewmembers, directly affected by the conditions and the experiences at sea, met the public and arranged talks. Even though the talks were only announced on improvised posters and with a very short notice, they always had a large and interested audience.

In this way, the Sea Stallion, the Trial Voyage and the research project reached a broad audience, remarkable in diversity – from people living in remote places, far from museums and research institutions to Dubliners, used to a rich variety of cultural institutions and experiences.

The reception of the Sea Stallion reflected a general interest in Viking Ships and Viking heritage along the coastlines of the old Viking World. But it probably also reflected the special quality given to the experience by the fleeting moment. It was a once-in-a-life-time opportunity to see a Viking Ship in “real life” – and you simply had to go before it was too late. The transitory nature of the moment contributed to the very creation of the visit as a unique event.

#### **The social / human aspect**

The Trial Voyage was dependant on the commitment of the voluntary crewmembers.

Before the launching of the Sea Stallion in 2004 we had called for volunteer crewmembers. We basically had to reinvent the thousand year old knowledge of how to sail a Viking longship with 65 men on board. We had to train safety procedures and we had to test the crewmembers ability to

stand the physical and not least the psychological hardships related to the limited space and the extreme conditions.

Not everybody could spend more than three weeks on sea, so we had to pick 82 persons for the crew.

- 60 men and 22 women,
- between 17 and 64 years of age.
- They came from 11 nations: Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Germany, Britain, Scotland, Ireland, The Netherlands, Canada, Tasmania, New Zealand
- And their occupations varied greatly. We had students, craftsmen, teachers, academics, nurses, unemployed etc. on board.

The majority of the crew members were attracted by the adventure; some of them had hardly any interest in museums, in history or in research. But during five years of interaction with the museum these very different personalities were transformed into a social unit: a crew with a mission. Dedicated not only to the voyage it self but also to the idea of participating in a research and communication project, based in a museum.

When the Trial Voyage ended in 2008, the crewmembers had each spend 180 days on the project. Being member of the crew influenced and enriched their identity.

When one of the elder crewmembers died during the vinter, he was buried in his Sea Stallion uniform. And the only thing that was said about his long life in the death notice, was, that he had been a member of the Sea Stallion Crew!

A less dramatic evidence of identification is the tattoos – that can be seen as a sign of the exclusive membership of the “tribe”.

The cooperation with the crew represented the most intensive interaction between the museum and a specific target group that we have experienced so far.

It also added a special quality to the communication plan. It offered a human and a social aspect, and made it easy for the audience to relate to the project. No matter what sex, size, age, religion, political observance or level of education ... there would be some one just like you among the crew. The many nationalities on board helped to spread the identification internationally.

The communication plan profited from the human aspect. Personal accounts were told in diaries on the website, supplemented by video podcasts that gave a very authentic picture of the situation on board the ship. Some of the crewmembers volunteered to give regular interviews or to blog on websites belonging to different media. Besides they gave lectures and talked to the audience on the quayside during the voyage.

It was obvious from the webpage, that a great number of audiences primarily got an insight into the project by following the personal accounts.

### **The artistic aspect**

A special ambition of this project has been to open the minds of the audience by offering another way of perception through art, with an emphasis of the meeting between Danish and Irish traditions.

We have arranged exhibitions in the Viking Ship Museum – combining photos, sculptures, poetry and music, and we have arranged concerts relating to the project.

Several fanfares have been composed for the ship; and some of the best Danish and Irish composers have compiled musical interpretations of the crossing of the North Sea.

The artistic expressions have primarily been based on strictly professional artists and performers. But at the same time, we have tried to engage the popular element – as 60 fiddlers from the North Atlantic area, quires, young performers from the local music schools, amateur photographers participating in a competition on the website, and children contributing with drawings and model ships etc. etc.

The artistic aspect has contributed to the atmosphere of the special events related to the Trial Voyage – like the departure and the home coming of the ship. And it has given the audience an opportunity for direct engagement in the project.

### **Why did it become a success? And how does it relate to a changing audience?**

In the discussion of audiences there seems to be a tendency to understand museums as players on a commercial market and to describe the audiences as professional consumers. Personally I consider this point of view to be oversimplified. Never the less the sociologists are describing some overall trends that may be part of the explanation for the success of the Sea Stallion Voyage.

The Danish sociologist, Eva Steensig, talks about:

- Individualization and self staging. We want to be in focus of our own lives. We want to feel alive and are attracted by experiences appealing to our senses.
- Origin and identity. We are fascinated by our own history and origin, and want to understand our selves as part of a common history
- Community spirit. We want to belong some where with some one.
- The fleeting moment. We are attracted by the intensity and exclusivity of events that are gone in a minute.
- Extremes. We are attracted by the extreme – especially physically extreme – experiences.
- Fusion of the virtual and the real.
- Respect for competence and specialist knowledge
- Trophy experiences. We want symbols of our cultural consumption.

These features may be especially useful to explain the long term commitment of the crew members. But the demands were in many ways met by the communication plan that invited the audience into the discussion, to participate in special events, competitions etc.

The communication plan was, admittedly, not made on the basis of knowledge about the changing audience and trends among modern consumers. It was based in a *dream*, and a desire to share it. We have built on our passion for knowledge, our curiosity, fascination and imagination. And besides the feeling of obligation, we have had the idea, that this could be fun to share with the world.

By combining our research and communication plans we improved them both. And we created a public space for reflection and experience.

The *vision* was easy to understand: We wanted to undertake a daring voyage, bringing a Viking longship from Denmark to Ireland and Back. The message had the same wonderful simplicity as the vision of bringing a man to the moon - a simple goal, fascinating and easy to understand – even though you don't understand the complexity of the preconditions to be met.

It was easy to *identify* with the modern crew and to engage in their experiences – especially because the crew represented men and women, all ages, a variety of occupations and interests and not least many nations.

The *story* was good and fascinating – and it was set free. A lot of people has integrated the Sea Stallion in the story of their life, since they have seen the ship, met the crew, joined a choir performing at some special event etc. etc.

Many people became *involved* in the needs of the ship and the crew during the voyage; this created a feeling of *ownership* to the project – especially pronounced in Dublin and Roskilde.

The Trial Voyage has demonstrated the potential of maritime museums. We have great stories to tell about our maritime past. The key to success lies in our passion for knowledge, our dreams and our desire to share them. And we have an audience out there, ready to listen and ready to join in.