

CITYtalking Response

Melbourne City Council Laneway Commissions 2006
Astra Howard

The CITYtalking Machine-Vehicle was deployed in Melbourne's CBD for 5 weeks from Wednesday to Sunday (10am to 4pm) from 4 October to Saturday 4 November 2006.

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1. Project summary

The CITYtalking Machine-Vehicle (M-V) was wheeled around Melbourne's CBD for five weeks by Astra Howard, the Action Researcher/Performer (AR/P). Each day the M-V would stop in approximately six different laneways and members of the public would be encouraged to enter inside. Once inside the passer-by would begin a conversation with the AR/P sitting in the opposite side of the M-V. The two people engaged in this discussion would speak to each other via an intercom. The entire conversation was occurred without either person seeing one another. As the member of the public spoke, the AR/P would type the basic discussion topics into a laptop computer. She would also attempt to capture the personality of the storyteller by recording the language and sentence structure being used. Once the conversation had ended and the member of the public left the M-V, the AR/P would edit the document to form a coherent story. She then transported the text into another program, which could communicate with the LED signs positioned on the outside of the M-V. Members of the public passing by the M-V were therefore able to read the accumulating narratives of the storytellers, which were progressively updated and broadcast.

A diverse range of people entered the CITYtalking M-V to engage in discussion, from five year olds to fifty year olds, buskers to business people, the homeless to hairdressers, students to stone masons and tourists to telemarketers. Some people stayed to talk for a few minutes, whereas others stayed for up to an hour. Discussion topics ranged from the everyday to the profound, which made for interesting viewing by passers-by reading the scrolling text. Many people expressed their genuine enthusiasm for the projects ability to provide a safe space for dialogue between strangers. Often members of the public could not believe that there was a person sitting on the other side of the CITYtalking M-V whose purpose was to listen to their story. Local business operators and street personalities befriended the AR/P and her assistant, as they became a familiar part of the local scene. Often due to the presence of the CITYtalking M-V within the laneway sites, there was an increase in activity and interaction between

members of the public. So much so, that in the final weeks of the CITYtalking deployment, locals would specifically await the arrival of the M-V, in order to view the updated stories and discuss its impact on the scene with familiar or new passers-by.

2. Summary of Responses

1. Members of the public who converse with the AR/P inside the M-V are often surprised to learn that they are talking to someone in real time who is sitting next to them on the other side.
2. Some members of the public (e.g. Greenpeace, an advertiser and an Independent film maker), ask if they can purchase the CITYtalking M-V or have a new version made for them once the project is finished.
3. Local commercial enterprises ask if the AR/P can put commentary about their business on the LED screen.
4. Members of the public ask to put particular messages on the LED screen that reference their friends, or particular events they are going to attend.
5. Members of public describe the CITYtalking M-V as being: a house, a public toilet, a photo M-V, a place to store pornographic material, a chat room, a suicide or gas chamber, or a confessional.
6. Members of the public from other capital cities such as Adelaide, Sydney and Perth, ask if the CITYtalking project can be undertaken in their own city to enliven the public spaces and increase interaction amongst strangers.
7. Members of public ask the AR/P for advice about issues concerning their life.
8. Some members of public want to see the AR/P after conversing, others do not want to be seen.
9. Some local businesses offer the AR/P and her assistant free coffee and tea as they report that the CITYtalking M-V is bringing customers to their area.
10. The CITYtalking M-V gets the most amount of reaction and interaction when it is positioned in areas where people are already sitting down to eat lunch or have a drink.
11. Members of the public are more willing to enter the CITYtalking M-V when they see someone else engaged in the conversation before them.

3. Laneway Experience

ULSTER LANE: Fairly quiet area populated mainly by business people who engage with the CITYtalking M-V during their cigarette break.

HUGH's ALLEY: Tight spot next to bins, quite a lot of passing traffic but generally nobody stops.

COHEN PLACE: Exposed sun, open space, cars moving into space, close to amenities.

THE CAUSEWAY: M-V gets lost in the advertising of the city and thoroughfare.

HOWEY PLACE: High culture shops, local café owners say the M-V will bring them business.

CENTRE PLACE: Most open to conversation as people are already sitting around relaxed drinking coffee, having lunch or looking at the graffiti.

DEGRAVES PLACE: Good location with the M-V facing the entrance to the train station, longer conversations here.

BOURKE STREET MALL: Lots of people moving past, works best when the M-V is positioned perpendicular to the thoroughfare.

DRIVER LANE: Visually very integrating, flow of people, not many stop.

LIVERPOOL STREET: Flow of interested people, quieter environment, many people stop to read.

4. Public Response

“It’s a conversation booth. Your scared to get in, go on”.

Some staff in local businesses at Ulster Place who have seen the CITYtalking M-V for the last few days, try to encourage other colleagues to engage.

“Oh fantastic. What is it?”

“Yeah you go in and tell your story”.

“It’s a dummy, a mannequin leg”.

“Is there someone in there? Where are they?”

“Where are you?” - people ask when inside the public side of the M-V.

“Oh my God there is someone in there”.

“That’s not a real person”.

“Do you have to pay to enter?”

..... “and the dog speaks French.....” - women read each line slowly and laugh at every sentence. They then realise that the AR/P is inside and say oh, I hope she didn’t hear us.

“It’s a nice idea, I like it.”

“I pass here everyday, so I will come in to talk sometime in the next few weeks.”

“What is it, a conversation booth, yeah they move around the city and record people’s conversation. That’s potentially dangerous. See, she writes it up on the screen”.

“We are from Greenpeace, can we rent this booth from you or buy it from you when you are finished? It would be perfect for our campaigns. You know, it is wise to make use of already existing resources”.

“Is it a house?”

“Is it a public toilet?”

“That’s where they live”.

“We need this in Adelaide” - says a woman from Adelaide.

“We need this in Perth, there is no funding for arts activities” - says a man from Perth.

“Is it a boy or a girl in there, it is definitely a dude.”

“Should I stay in Australia or leave to Belgium?”

“Can I give you my phone number so that we can continue this discussion after, beyond the booth?”

Man walks around the M-V a few times then when asked if he would go in, he says no, I have to go back to work.

Man who owns Japanese restaurant across the road at Cohen Place asks the AR/P and assistant: *“would you like a drink? You can have anything for free. I think the council has put all its money into the downtown part of the city and left us with nothing. No one comes up to China Town and Cohen Place anymore.*

So please let us know if you want something”.

Some of the local businesses around where we stop the CITYtalking M-V (e.g. a florist & café) ask whether they can run some text across the LED screen advertising their produce.

“What is it all about? So there is something different on the front and back LED screens? Well what’s the point of that?”

“Well with the money spent on this thing, you would have been able to house her” - a passer-by exclaims after reading Leonie's (a local homeless woman) story on the LED display.

“What is it, it is a notice board?”

“How cool is that!”

“I don’t have any good stories to tell”.

“I will come back when I have some stories”.

“I am just walking past a fringe festival.....”

“It’s a porno place, you get porn’s in there”.

“What the hell is that?”

“A little photo booth, that’s cool”.

“You are back again!”

Café patrons opposite the CITYtalking M-V, read the LED sign through the window as they eat.

“So there is actually someone else sitting in there?”

“Sometimes there is someone in it”.

“That’s that thing you see them dragging around the city all the time”.

“I think you should put some pillows and mirrors on the inside, maybe even some framed photos, that would make it more inviting. The mirrors would be good because then people could see themselves as they talk”.

Lucas and Stuart conduct a radio interview inside the CITYtalking M-V at Bourke Street Mall. Stephan conducts a radio interview at Centre Place and also in

Bourke Street Mall.

"If you get people to go into such a little booth you may as well have a hangman's noose in it. It looks like a gas chamber, you wouldn't get any Jews going in there for sure. You must have been a Nazi if you designed it".

"What the fuck's this trolley thing?"

"So I go in and have a conversation, well why do I have to ask you that, why isn't there a sign that just says that".

Local group of young people hang around the CITYtalking M-V discussing amongst themselves what they think it is about. One of them walks past and hits the side of the M-V where the AR/P is sitting and then continues to walk on. The friends all laugh and then get on the tram.

"It has a lot of advertising potential".

"What the? Ok that is just weird, scary!"

"Oh my God, there is someone in there!"

Members of the public who are aware of CITYtalking or those working in local cafes describe it to passers-by.

"Can she hear us? Is she getting high in there now?"

"Can she see out? I wanted to get her opinion on something, but if she can't see out."

A girl enters the M-V and the AR/P says hello. There is no response. The AR/P is sure that she is still in there. Then she begins to read a very pertinent quote. Three separate paragraphs with a space in between. The AR/P asks in the first break in her monologue whether these are her words that she is reading, or if it is a quote from someone else. She doesn't answer and keeps on reading. Later in the day she returns to the M-V to talk directly with the AR/P. She said that she didn't realise someone was in the other side, so she just read a text as if talking to a machine recorder.

"What's he selling?"

Person walks past and taps on panel behind the AR/P.

"I think it's a web cam".

Cars stop at the side of the M-V when it is positioned on Liverpool Street, and

their occupants read the LED text before continuing on their journey.
"What's going on here?"

"Oh there is a guy in there".

"Daniel you are rolling, you have moved to another spot. Daniel you sound like a girl".

"It is a talking box mate, it is a talking head, it's a lady in there and she is talking to ya".

"It's a talking box buddy, are you going to hop inside it or what?"

"G'day mate, it is a talking box".

Local homeless man starts promoting the project to passing pedestrians.

"Have you ever had someone have sex in here before?"

"Do you get bored in there?"

"Is there a camera, can you see us?"

"It is funny seeing you wheeling this booth across the tram tracks on the street, it looks like a hotdog stand".

"Where's the party tonight? I thought you knew, or would be able to tell us where it is all happening".

MX magazine photographer comes around to take some photos of the CITYtalking M-V in action. A decision is made to keep the AR/P anonymous and get a photo of members of the public inside the M-V conversing and others waiting for their turn to go in.

"Hey what are you doing inside there man?"

"Yeah it is a newspaper stand, we saw these guys dragging one of these up the top of town the other day".

A number of people read the text scrolling on the LED screens but do not feel as though they have a 'good enough' story to tell. Others seem familiar with the concept of the M-V and say to their friends- "yeah it is a conversation booth, you go in and talk".

People begin to see and acknowledge the presence of the CITYtalking M-V in many different locations across the city. For example, one member of the public

exclaimed to the AR/P and her assistant- “yeah I saw it in Bourke Street Mall, and when you were wheeling it along Swanston street.”

“How cool is that, you can go in there and talk to someone, that is so cool”.

People stick their hand under the AR/P’s blind, or bend down to look under it in order to attract attention, or see the person inside.

“Oh great, I was waiting for you to come back with the booth”.

“I saw this box a few weeks ago and I was trying to track it back down. I asked the people in the tourist office if they knew where the box was, but they were not able to help me. Then I was just walking down here today and there it was. I think this is the best location for it”.

“That’s horrible to show your story to the rest of the world”.

“It’s a machine in there, what if we set fire to this thing and smoke the rat out of the box, oh it is a Tardis”.

“...and if we rolled it over this way then she couldn’t get out!”

“Can I come in and talk dirty? So it can be a clean or dirty story?”

“So what’s the catch?”

5. AR/P Response

The CITYtalking M-V encouraged a private conversation to occur in public and a public conversation to occur in private. It achieved this by creating a private space in public for the purpose of engaging in conversation and storytelling between two strangers. The private conversation was then transferred to the public domain for all members of the community to read via the LED screen attached to the outside of the M-V.

The AR/P listened and talked to any person who entered the CITYtalking M-V. As the AR/P was unable to see the person on the other side, each conversation began without clues or prejudices based on appearance or behaviour. As the conversation progressed, each unique story revealed itself, creating a narrative picture of the individual circa 2006. Even though the two people did not see one another during the conversation, a strong connection was felt. The AR/P was however not completely anonymous, as she could be seen wheeling the CITYtalking M-V around the city from one laneway to another. Some members of the public insisted on meeting the AR/P face-to-face after their conversation.

Some of the passersby who entered the conversation M-V, immediately pulled

down the blind in front of them in order to be anonymous. Others however enjoyed being seen sitting in the M-V actively engaging. Some of those people entering into discussion with the AR/P who left the blind open, said that they felt passersby looked at them strangely as if they were talking to themselves. A number of people said that they felt storytelling was a dying art form and were glad to see it being used in CITYtalking.

Some people who read the LED display on the outside of the M-V thought that the conversation was being sent live to the screen. One example was when a father and daughter arrived at the M-V and the daughter decided to get in for a chat. The father began to be quite concerned about what the daughter was saying as the text on the LED screen outside was describing a story about a long-standing drug habit. The AR/P and assistant consequently told people who entered the M-V that their story would not be displayed live, as the technology was not voice recognition. Instead, the AR/P would take around ten minutes to edit each story before adding it to the rolling LED display.

A local homeless man who became interested in the CITYtalking M-V began encouraging members of the public to jump in and tell their story. He repeated: *“it’s a talking box, come on go in there and talk to her”*.

There was no particular demographic of individual who entered the CITYtalking M-V. The people who participated ranged from business people, buskers, students, homeless people, tourists, etc. The age of the person involved also ranged from the youngest being about 5 years old to the oldest probably around 70 years old.

Some people entered the CITYtalking M-V without hesitation as they passed-by it on the street. Others required more encouragement to enter, not sure as to whether they would be talking to a machine or a real person. Some people found it too confronting to speak directly with an anonymous individual, whereas others were intrigued to speak with someone sitting next to them who they could not see.

Local business owners, buskers and homeless people became increasingly interested in the CITYtalking project as it maintained an active presence in the city over a significant duration of time. The M-V also attracted people to laneway locations where it was positioned on a daily basis. Members of the public would spend a substantial amount of time reading the displayed narratives, some reading the texts aloud, thereby embodying the stories of these strangers. Quite often when the Big Issue vendors were having a slower day in sales, there would be less engagement by the public in CITYtalking. Then on a busier day of sales for the vendors, there would also be more conversations. One could begin to predict the flows of pedestrian traffic across the city and the way individual and community sentiment progressively shifted over the course or a day, week or month.