

WHY JOHNNY DIDN'T READ LABELS

In 1963, George Weiner, who was Supervisory Exhibits Editor at the Smithsonian, wrote an article on exhibit labels that has become one of the classic papers on writing labels. The article touches on the most fundamental principles of good writing. Weiner discusses the following characteristics of labels: simplicity; length; visual presentation; color; and positioning. On simplicity, Weiner reminds us to use language that is understandable but never insulting. He cites an example of violating the simplicity rule. He observed one label with the phrase, "having unguligrade locomotion". This might describe the way a horse walks on its hooves to a mammalogist, but to the average visitor, this phrase makes little sense. On length, Weiner points out that labels can be too short as well as too long. He presents an example of a label that was too short: a peculiar object was labeled, "Niddy Noddy", with no explanation provided. On the other extreme, he suggests a general guideline of no more than 75 words per label. On visual presentation and color, Weiner recommends that a label "...should be visually appealing in format, in letters large enough to be read with ease..." Regarding color, he complains that "...many museum artists so concentrate on trying to find the most pleasing combination of color that they entirely overlook the fact that some of these combinations are barely legible." He suggested both acceptable and unacceptable color combinations for letters and background. Finally, on positioning of the labels, Weiner insists that labels be as close as possible to the targeted exhibit. They should be easy for a visitor to find.

Now all of these suggestions, presented in splendid detail by Weiner, may seem terribly simple and obvious, but the fact is, they are often overlooked. Recently, in a well-known and respected museum, I found labels with print one-half the size of letters from a normal typewriter. In addition, these particular labels were exhibited in a rotating case! Another example shows a label next to a donor plaque which reads, "These ugly creatures drink the blood of warm-blooded animals for nourishment." I hope visitors associated this label with the vampire bat exhibit four feet away rather than the donor plaque. [From "Why Johnny Can't Read Labels", by G. Weiner, *Curator*, 6, 136-143. Summarized by Pete Conroy, Curator of Natural History, Anniston Museum of Natural History, Anniston, AL]

VARIABLES INFLUENCING VISITOR BEHAVIOR: PHYSICAL QUALITIES OF THE EXHIBIT OBJECT/SPECIES

Few would dispute the fact that many variables influence visitor behavior or that zoos and museums are likely to produce differential effects on visitors. However, I believe it is both possible and necessary to develop general principles that can be used to guide the exhibit designers, the facility planners, and the decision-makers of exhibit-type facilities. There is currently enough information to begin a formulation, however tentative, of the principles of visitor behavior. I would like to suggest two principles of visitor behavior that deal with the physical qualities of the exhibit object or species.

Principle #1: Larger objects/animals produce significantly greater holding power (duration of viewing) than smaller objects/animals, all other variables being equal.

In our research in zoos we found a correlation of 0.65 between animal size (weight) and viewing time. Although we do not have museum data yet, it is my impression from casual observations that the same relationship holds for museum objects: larger objects generally result in longer viewing times. (If you have data from a museum setting, please let me know.)

When designing exhibits, the size of the object or animal should help to predict the holding power and consequently suggest possible visitor traffic problems. Also, if you wish to keep visitors in an exhibit area longer, making the exhibit object larger may help.

Principle #2: Exhibits with motion produce significantly greater holding power than exhibits without motion.

In zoos we have found that animal activity is highly correlated with the viewing time. Active animals tend to be viewed twice as long as inactive animals. Motion in museum exhibits appear to produce the same result. (I'm looking for data from museums).

What are the implications of this principle? The exhibit designer might consider incorporating motion into the design, if it will not detract from the objectives of the exhibit. Another implication relates to the placement of exhibits. It might be imprudent to place an exhibit with motion adjacent to a similar one unless care is taken to prevent crowds from impeding traffic flow. [From "Principles of Visitor Behavior" by S. Bitgood, Jacksonville State University, (Manuscript under preparation)]