Practical Guidelines for Developing Interpretive Labels

The first section of this special issue briefly reviews some of the available label guidelines. It should be helpful for those of you who wish to develop labels to consider some of the issues and guidelines found in the literature. Only brief outlines of publications are included here. The reader is encouraged to obtain the original sources for a more detailed discussion of label development. Information on where to obtain the references is provided for the reader.

Rand, J. (1985). Fish stories that hook readers: Interpretive graphics at the Monterey Bay Aquarium. *AAZPA 1985 Conference*. Columbus, OH: American Association of Zoological Parks & Aquariums. (Also available as Technical Report # 90-30. Center for Social Design, P. O. Box 1111, Jacksonville, AL 36265).

This paper has some excellent examples of label content that illustrate Rand's guiding principles.

Objectives for the Labels:

1. Attract the readers' interest and draw them into the subject.
2. Correct misconceptions the visitor may have.
3. Reach the more advanced reader with more complex concepts rather than more complex language.
4. Do more than tell the facts; ask questions.
5. Present problems.
6. Express a sense of the unknown. (For example, in marine science, acknowledge unanswered questions about the oceans.)
7. Draw analogies.
8. Use a reader-relevant approach to explain things.
9. Write in easily understandable language aimed at the 7th-8th grade reading level.
10. Communicate in a conversational tone that is approachable, familiar, often humorous, but not flippant or formal.
11. Maintain a style characterized by active voice and vivid language.
12. Address the reader directly.
13. Anticipate and answer questions.
14. Be concise, friendly, highly interesting, inviting the audience to read and keep reading.

Techniques on how to transmit your message

1. Find your voice, then keep a steady tone.
2. Make every word count.
3. Watch your language!
4. Enjoy English as much as science.
5. Show your style.
6. Talk straight.
7. Surprise!

Rand, J. (1993). Building on your ideas. In S. Bicknell & Farmelo, G. (eds.), *Museum visitor studies in the 90s*. London, UK: Science Museum. Pp. 145-149

PASS key instructions:
Purpose: Why do we want to say this?
Audience: Who do we want to say it to?
Subject: What do we want to say?
Strategy: How are we going to say it?

Structure for Learning

The literature tells us that:
(1) Structured information facilitates learning.
(2) Intellectual structure should be made clear.
(3) Structure should be clearly and consistently contained in the physical structure and sequence of the exhibition.

Miles et al (1993): "The structure is not conceived as something to be imposed upon the visitor. Its purpose is solely to unify the presentation of the intellectual material and make it easier for the visitor to find his way around the exhibition, following his own inclinations."

Stages of Interpretive Strategy (Monterey Bay Aquarium):
(1) *Messages*: choosing the main message; amassing the other messages.
(2) *Interpretive framework*: ranking the other messages in importance; relating and organizing the messages in a concept outline; adding factual background
(3) *Storyline and development*: shaping the framework into a storyline; using the framework to guide exhibition development and media choice.

Suggestions for writing the interpretive framework:

1. Choosing the main message
    What is the most important idea that you want people to leave with. Write it down in a single sentence. Is it simple, direct, and clear? Will it interest visitors?

2. Ranking and relating the ideas
    • What do you want to say to support the main message? Write each idea on an index card. How does each idea relate to the main message?
    • Rank the cards into most important, somewhat important, and less important.
    • A *primary message* is one that we feel we must communicate to a sizable number of visitors (but fewer than main message). Subject of major labels.
    • A *secondary message* is one we feel we should communicate to visitors (but less than for primary messages); label copy that supports primary messages.

[Rand (1993) - Continued from previous page]

• A *tertiary message* is one that we feel it might be nice to communicate to visitors (serve as a footnote function when there is room to include them).

3. Storyline development

Ways of organizing information:
• Location
• Alphabet
• Time
• Category
• Hierarchy (or continuum)

Handy All-Purpose Development Tool
(a) Narration: What happened?
(b) Description/definition: What does it look like? What is it?
(c) Process analysis: How do you do it?
(d) Comparison/contraries: How are they similar? different?
(e) Classification: How is it subdivided?
(f) Causal analysis: Why did it happen? What will this do?

Screven, C. G. (1992). Motivating visitors to read labels. *ILVS Review*, 2(2), 183-211.

Components of Labels:
1. Content: text and message elements.
2. Structure: legibility, organization, size, typeface, density of information, colors.
3. Presentation format: interactivity, sound, graphics, video, computers.
4. Context: noise, lighting, sight-lines, competing stimuli.

Functions of labels:
1. Information on visual content of exhibits
2. Instruct visitors
3. Personalize topics
4. Interpret exhibit content
5. Conceptual orientation (what to expect, how things are organized)

Goals for Using Labels:
1. Attraction to labels or exhibit content
2. Focus attention
3. Correct misconceptions
4. Connect explanations to familiar experience/ knowledge
5. Encourage active attention
6. Make ideas more familiar
7. Encourage visitors to draw analogies
8. Ask questions visitors commonly have about subject

9. Faciliate projection into an exhibit situation
10. Challenge visitors to problem solve

Motivating Label Usage:
1. Reward mindful reading and attention
2. Structure text
3. Format and placement of text
4. Presentation formats
    a. Information maps
    b. Leading questions
    c. Flipper labels
    d. Computer labels
5. Levels of interactive labels
    a. Conventional label
    b. Covert interaction
    c. Secondary interaction
    d. Direct interaction
    e. Adaptive interaction

See the article for a description of each topic listed above.

Serrell, B. (1996). From *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach.* Walnut Creek, CA: Altamura Press.

Ten Deadly Sins of Label Design

1. Not related to a big idea, ramble without focus or objectives.
2. Too much emphasis on presenting information rather than offering provocation.
3. Fail to address audience's prior knowledge/misconceptions/interests.
4. No apparent organizational system.
5. Difficult vocabulary.
6. Too long and wordy.
7. Ask questions of which visitors are not interested.
8. Interactive labels that lack integrated, logical instructions or interpretations.
9. Do not begin with concrete, visual references.
10. Hard to read because of physical characteristics (typeface, colors, lighting, placement).

Helpful Research and Evaluation Findings

1. Visitors likely to spend more time and learn more when they have good conceptual and spatial orientation.
2. Visitors are more likely to use a higher proportion of exhibition and understand what it is about when they spend more time.
3. Higher percentage of visitors read shorter labels.
4. A broad cross section of visitors will be attracted to the most popular part of a good exhibition.
5. The same adult audience read labels and use interactive devices.
6. Location is important: labels placed out of the visitors' line of sight receive less attention; labels get more attention if they are next to the objects they describe.

[Serrell – Continued from previous page]

7. Labels accompanying concrete objects are more likely to be read than labels from text-only displays.
8. Increased reading is likely to occur if information is chunked into short paragraphs.
9. Visitors are more likely to read-look-read-look and to point and talk if the labels contain concrete, visually referenced information.
10. Visitors are more likely to read aloud labels that visitors find interesting; social interaction is enhanced by reading aloud.
11. Readers spend more time and do more things in exhibits than nonreaders.
12. Adults are more likely to read text to children if labels are easy to read out loud without having to paraphrase or translate the language to children.
13. Labels are more likely to be read by children if they provide easily accesible and useful information.
14. Visitors find labels more meaningful and memorable if images and words work together.

This is a small sample of what you will find in Serrell's book. Those who develop labels are strongly encouraged to purchase this book.

A Summary of *Doing It Right: A Workbook for Improving Exhibit Labels.* published by The Brooklyn Children's Museum (1989). Summarized by Dana Johnson

This publication was the result of a two-year label assessment project; it was concerned with how well labels communicate with the intended audience and about what tools help develop improved labels. The project involved the following steps:
1) Set objectives, keep in mind resources at hand and the character of the institution.
2) Allocate resources (time, staff, and money).
3) Investigate alternative approaches used by others.
4) Conduct audience surveys and develop an audience profile.
5) Assess current situation and evaluate its effectiveness.
6) Develop guidelines for writing, designing, and evaluating labels in the future.
7) Write new labels, conducting formative evaluation on the draft copy before the final labels are produced.

ORGANIZING THE PROJECT

Set Objectives
This section gives advice on setting goals that are attainable and show immediate tangible results from the team approach. It suggests setting up a time table so that each task will have a completion date or target. Objectives might be to:

1) Evaluate all existing labels and change labels that have proven to be ineffective
2) Develop an audience profile
3) Establish guidelines for writing and design for future labels
4) Identify and formalize the label-writing process for your institution

Appoint a Committee
The Brooklyn Children's Museum chose one member from each of the program departments such as collections, exhibitions, and education. The director supervised the project. The book advises that individuals be selected: who trust each other's opinions, who are interested in the project, and who have few preconceived notions about labels. The use of a task chart is recommended to help divide the work and clarify each team member's role.

ASSESSING THE CURRENT SITUATION

Learn from Other Institutions
Visiting institutions in your area and investigating label techniques used elsewhere will help to spark ideas. Examine a variety of institutions similar to your own as well as ones that are different. Include art museums, zoos, historic houses, and even retail businesses such as supermarkets.

Understand Your Museum's Mission
Figure out your museum's goals and decide what kind of experience you want to provide before you evaluate whether you have achieved your goal.

Profile Your Audience
Formulate a visitor profile by finding out the composition of visitor groups such as age range, geographic distribution, socio-economic status, and educational background. Then determine areas of interest and visitor return. Conducting surveys is a good way to assess visitors' perception of a museum. Since this is a major undertaking, museums often depend on outside consultations to help design a study.

Assess Your Labels
Ask questions such as: Are labels well lit ? Do they reflect too much glare ? What about size, color, and placement? Do they call too much attention to themselves ? The workbook suggests that labels be classified by type and function. This will help identify each labels function. You will want to set criteria such as minimizing type size for each category.

Review Your Label Development Process
A good label arises out of a need to communicate a particular point. A formative evaluation is best. Prototypes should be developed and tested to ensure the most effective

[*Doing It Right* - Continued from previous page]

communication. Label copy must undergo review by a group that may include a content specialist, an editor, and an educator. After the reviewers and the writers reach a consensus on the content of labels, they need to be tested out on visitors.

CONDUCTING EVALUATION

Front-End Research and Formative Evaluation
A description of evaluation intended for the novice is provided in this section. Front-end research and formative evaluation refer to research and evaluation done before an exhibition is installed. Summative evaluation refers to evaluation conducted when the exhibition and the finished labels are in place.

Summative Evaluation
Summative evaluation of labels can be measured using three measures: 1) attracting power 2) holding power 3) effective transfer of information.

SETTING GUIDELINES FOR THE FUTURE

The Cast of Characters
How do you decide which components of an exhibition should be evaluated, when, and how? At the Brooklyn Children's Museum, the exhibition developers make those decisions, since they are most familiar with the exhibition communication goals. Other choices could be the writer of the labels, a member of the exhibition development team, staff members, or someone who has had no prior dealings with the exhibition.

Some Hints on Writing
The book points out different ways to present information since you cannot write one kind of label and expect it to fulfill each visitor's need. Some institutions layer their labels, so that the most basic information is in large type, and more detailed information is spelled out beneath it. You may also put the most important information in the first sentence or two and follow it with more details.

An average label should contain no more than 130 to 150 syllables per 100 words and no more than 15 words per sentence.

Some Hints on Design
The book presents handy guidelines for legibility when designing labels:
- Provide strong contrast between type and background.
- Mix upper and lower case letters.
- Lines should contain fewer than 60 characters.
- Labels more than 50 words should be broken into 2 or 3 smaller chunks.
- Placement and lighting can greatly affect attracting power of a label.

Other Publications on Label Development

Bitgood, S. (1990). The ABCs of label design. In S. Bitgood, A. Benefield, & D. Patterson, *Visitor studies: Theory, research, and practice, vol. 3*. Jacksonville, Al: Center for Social Design. Pp. 115-129.

McLean, K. (1993). *Planning for People in Museum Exhibitions*. Washington, DC: Association of Science-Technology Centers.

McDermott-Lewis, M. (1990). *The Denver Art Museum Interpretive Project*. Denver: Denver Art Museum.

Minneapolis Institute of Arts, The Interdivisional Committee on Intepretation (1993). *Interpretation at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts: Policy and Practice*. Minneapolis: Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

Schloder, J., Williams, M., & Mann, C. G. (1993). *The visitor's voice: Visitor studies in the Renaissance-Baroque galleries of the Cleveland Museum of Art 1990-1993*. Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art.

Visitor Behavior (1989). Volume 4, Issue #3. Special Issue on Label Design.

Going to the AAM Meeting in Atlanta?

The Visitor Studies Association has reserved a block of rooms at the Best Western Inn at the Peachtrees from April 26 through 30, 1997. The rate is $89 per night and includes a hot breakfast buffet and complementary cocktails Monday through Thursday evening. The hotel is within walking distance to the conference sessions.

Only 30 rooms are reserved, so make your reservation immediately! Ask for a reservation under the Visitor Studies Association.

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