

Museum Orientation and Circulation

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Orientation can be divided into conceptual (thematic) and physical (wayfinding). Conceptual orientation refers to knowledge of the themes and activities available in a setting. Wayfinding deals with the ability of a user to find his/her way to/from and within a setting. A final concept associated with these terms is circulation or the way people move through a space.

PREVISIT ORIENTATION

Orientation does not begin at the entrance of the exhibition center. Visitors acquire critical knowledge long before they actually visit. This previsit knowledge has important implications for visitation. For example, we might expect that visitors will be able to concentrate more on the interpretive or educational messages if they have previsit knowledge about the exhibition center. Even more importantly, previsit knowledge can determine whether or not visitors can find a museum!

1. Conceptual Orientation

Why is conceptual orientation important? (1) Expectations can determine whether or not people visit a facility; and (2) visitor expectations can influence both the experience and how information is interpreted. Obviously, if the subject matter of the exhibition center does not sound inviting to potential visitors, they are unlikely to make a visit. With respect to the second point, Hayward & Brydon-Miller (1984) found that visitors often entered Sturbridge Village with misconceptions concerning the historical period described in the museum; as a result, they misinterpreted their exhibit experiences. Suggestions:

- *Provide visitors with sufficient and accurate information about what the museum is all about.*
- *Information should include exhibition themes, programs, other activities, time budgeting information, etc.*
- *Include adequate conceptual orientation in visitor brochures, billboards, publicity, etc.*

2. Wayfinding

An effective wayfinding system is important so that visitors can move through the museum in an efficient manner, so that visitors do not fatigue easily, and so that visitors may concentrate on enjoying their experience rather than spending unnecessary time finding their way.

- *Ensure that phone-book listings, airport displays, pamphlets, travel guides, direction signs and other information in the community about the facility contains adequate wayfinding information (Loomis, 1987).*

3. Evaluation Checklist: Previsit

- Where did visitors learn about facility? How accurate is this information?
- Do visitors understand the major themes, activities, and how long it will take to visit?
- Was it difficult or confusing attempting to find the center? If so, what were the reasons for this problem?
- Are pathfinding road signs distinct from other highway signs?
- Are there pathfinding signs at all key intersections leading to the facility?
- Does vegetation (trees, bushes) obstruct the view of the entrance and/or direction signs?
- Are letters on signs legible in terms of size, contrast with background, and font style?

ARRIVAL & ENTRANCE ORIENTATION

Once visitors arrive, they are confronted with new potential problems. Can they find a place to park? Is the visitor entrance clearly marked? Several guidelines may help ensure adequate arrival orientation:

- *The purpose of the facility should be clearly indicated on the outside of the building.*
- *Special exhibitions should be noted either with special signs or banners before entering the building or site.*
- *Direction signs should clearly identify parking lots and the visitor entrance.*
- *Wayfinding from public transportation should be provided.*

LOBBY ORIENTATION

Once in the exhibition center, visitors must make decisions about whether or not they are willing to pay the entrance fee, where to go to get tickets, where to find the rest rooms, how to plan their visit, etc. Lobby orientation is critical because this is where visitors make important decisions: Is it worth paying the entrance fee? Do I have enough time to visit the museum? Which exhibitions do I want to see and in which programs do I want to participate? Should I eat in the cafeteria or restaurant? Museum lobbies are usually filled with visual stimuli and sometimes very crowded. How, where, and what information is presented sets the tone for the entire visit. Customer relations is critical in this area – friendly people greeting visitors, answering questions, and dealing with problems is critical.

1. Conceptual Orientation

- Provide information about what can be seen and done.
- Give clear directions to restrooms, exhibits, gift shop, food, etc.
- Give adequate information to allow time budgeting.
- Provide easy-to-see information on guided tours and/or self-guided tours.

2. Wayfinding

- Ensure that the ticket desk/booth is clearly marked.
- Provide clear directions for amenities such as rest rooms, food, and gift shop.
- Make sure the reception desk attracts visitors by providing an effective location and eye-catching labelling.
- Design visitor guides with a readable map.
- Provide good customer relations with friendly greeters at the entrance (ticket counter, information booth, etc.)

3. Evaluation Checklist:

- ___ Does lobby orientation provide adequate information about what there is to do, how long it will take, etc.?
- ___ Can visitors easily find ticketing, restrooms, gift shop, and other information?
- ___ Is there an information booth? Is it clearly marked and in the best location?
- ___ Are there topographical organizers showing layout of the museum?
- ___ Are there suggested routes through the museum according to time constraints and interests?
- ___ Are front-line staff friendly and informed; do they handle problems in a way that maintains good customer relations?

DURING-VISIT ORIENTATION

The visitor now has his/her ticket, has visited the rest room, has planned his/her visit in terms of which areas and activities to see and do. The adventure begins. And a whole new set of potential problems must be confronted. Where is the exhibition hall? Which way do I go? Will I find all of the exhibit displays that I want to see? Will I miss any exhibits? Do I really understand the exhibit themes? Will I be able to find the restroom? Will I be close to the cafeteria when I get hungry?

1. Conceptual Orientation

- Exhibition themes should be clearly stated without having to enter exhibition areas.
- Slide or film orientation can be effective if all (or most) visitors are encouraged to see it.

[See pages 7 and 8 for additional guidelines for orientation and wayfinding within an exhibition.]

2. Wayfinding

- Place information where it's needed, especially at choice points.
- Provide redundant wayfinding information.
- Make sure names of exhibits, exhibit areas, and other locations are consistent. An exhibit area or display or any other location should not have two different names.
- Identifiers for exhibitions should be informative. For example, *The Robert Smith Hall* does not provide the visitor with information about the theme of the hall.
- Guards should be trained to answer orientation questions and give wayfinding directions (Loomis, 1987).
- You-are-here maps should adhere to three principles: (1) forward-up equivalence (Up on the map should represent forward space in the setting; right on the map should be oriented to right in the environment, etc.); (2) you-are-here symbol is needed to let visitors know where they are in relation to other things; (3) a salient feature (landmark) should be identified on the map and be visible in the environment.
- Hand-held maps should have only the essential information and features portrayed should be easily identified.
- Directional signs should be placed where they will be noticed, where they are needed, and should be consistent with other wayfinding devices.

3. Circulation Pathway

There are consistent patterns people use to move through public spaces. If exhibition center spaces are designed with this knowledge, they should be more successful in providing visitors with a satisfying experience. As a general rule, visitors like to keep in visual contact with a familiar place such as the entrance lobby or a main pathway. Pathways that deviate too much from the security of a main path are less likely to be used. Other important factors that influence visitor circulation:

- Landmarks have the strongest influence on visitor circulation. Place a large, attractive object in the middle of a gallery, and people tend to walk toward it.
- Inertia is another factor that influences circulation path. People tend to continue on the same path or in the same direction unless there is something else to pull them one way or another.
- In the absence of the above two principles, there appears to be a right-turn bias; that is, people tend to turn right when coming to a choice point if there are no other forces stronger at the moment.
- An open door in a hall or gallery has an attracting force all to itself. Visitors tend to walk out the first open door they encounter.
- Finally, at times, people simply follow others when moving through an environment.

4. Evaluation Checklist: During the Visit

- ___ Can visitors find their way to exhibitions, rest rooms, food, gift shops, telephone, etc. no matter where they are in the museum?
- ___ Are visitors able to use maps and other orientation devices to find their way?
- ___ Are exhibition themes and direction signs clearly marked so visitors can find them?
- ___ Are exhibitions designed with knowledge of how visitors circulate through such spaces?

EXITING ORIENTATION

Even when the visit is ending and visitors are ready to leave, problems of orientation have not ended. Can I find the exit? Will I be able to find my car in the sea of automobiles? Can I find a restaurant for lunch or dinner? Is there lodging information in the lobby? Suggested guidelines include:

- *Exits should be clearly marked.*
- *Provide wayfinding directions to main highways.*
- *Give information on public transportation including schedule, stops, routes.*
- *Make sure visitors are able to find their car in parking lot.*
- *Ensure that information about restaurants, lodging, or other tourist centers is available as visitors exit.*

Suggested Guidelines for Orientation Signage

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Orientation and wayfinding signage should follow the same principles as any other type of signage (e.g., Bitgood, 1989; 1990; 1993). As with any written message, orientation messages should be easily noticed and appealing enough to hold attention. They must also communicate their purpose. While the following list of principles does not include all that are possibly important, it offers a starting point for someone who wishes to construct a checklist.

1. Place signage where it is needed and where it will be noticed. It is especially important at the beginning of a visit and at critical choice points along the way.
2. Signage and letters on the signage must be sufficiently large to afford easy reading and to attract attention even when there are many other competing visual stimuli.

3. Signage must fall easily within visitors' line of sight as they walk through the setting. It is useful to walk through the space and see whether or not the orientation signage is well placed in terms of line of sight.
4. Number of words should be kept at a minimum so that visitors can extract information without having to stop.
5. Contrast between lettering and background must be sufficient to create legible text.
6. Contrast between the sign and its environment must be sharp enough to make the sign stand out from its background.
7. Consistent layout and color help identify an orientation sign from exhibit labels and other information signage.
8. Signage should be tested for effectiveness. Orientation signage must attract and hold attention as well as communicate a message. The only way to know for sure that these criteria are met is to test the signs.
9. Terminology must be consistent. The same wording to describe locations should be used throughout the facility. Thus, visitors may be confused if wayfinding signage identifies an exhibition as "Vanishing Wetlands" and the actual exhibit is entitled "The Changing Wetlands."
10. Terminology should make sense to the visitor. An Omnimax theater should indicate that it presents a film instead of calling it "Spacedome" or some other term that doesn't communicate its function.
11. Typeface should be easy to read. Old English or script or other such difficult-to-read typeface will influence how effectively the orientation message is communicated.

References

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