

## Visitor Orientation and Circulation: Some General Principles

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It has been several years since we published a special issue of *Visitor Behavior* on visitor orientation and circulation [*Visitor Behavior*, 1(4), 1987]. The current article is an update on this topic. Unfortunately, exhibition centers do not always pay enough attention to these areas. Visitors, on the other hand, can be painfully aware of this lack of attention. People are more likely to return or spread positive word-of-mouth about their visit if orientation and circulation factors facilitate, rather than hinder a successful visit.

General principles will be divided into three major areas: conceptual orientation, visitor circulation, and wayfinding. While the principles which follow are not meant to be exhaustive, research and experience suggest they include many of the important considerations from the visitor perspective.

### Principles of Conceptual Orientation

1. Visitors tend to have a more satisfying experience and acquire more knowledge when they are given information about where to go, what to expect, how long it might take to visit, where to find rest rooms, etc. [e.g., Bitgood & Benefield, 1989; Shettel-Neuber & O'Reilly, 1981].
2. Advance organizers that give pre-knowledge about the theme and content of the exhibit before entering the exhibit area are preferred by visitors and will usually facilitate understanding of the messages. However, these must be carefully designed and placed if they are to be effective. [e.g., Griggs, 1983; Screven, 1986].
3. The only sure way to determine if visitors are adequately conceptually oriented is to obtain systematic input from a visitor study.

### Principles of Visitor Circulation

**Explicit cues.** Some stimuli that influence visitor circulation patterns are explicit. The following principles relate to such cues:

1. People tend to approach landmarks, moving objects or animals, sound, and large objects. Thus, such factors can be used to attract visitors in the direction you wish to lead them; or they may function to distract visitors and lead them in directions you do not wish them to go.

2. Visitors tend to turn in the direction of the closest visible exhibit, all other factors being equal (e.g., Yoshioka, 1943).
3. Spatial arrangements involving exhibit islands create pockets of low attention (apparently because the traffic flow does not place each object within the visitor's line-of-sight or because of no systematic way to see all of the exhibit objects in the space). [Bitgood, et al., 1991; Miles, et al., 1982; Shettel, 1976.]
4. People tend to approach an area containing other people, unless it is too congested in which case a crowd may have a repelling effect.
5. People tend to approach and exit a room when they encounter an open doorway even if they have not viewed all of the exhibits or objects in the room. (See Melton, 1935.)
6. Exhibits that are on the periphery of exhibition areas are less likely to be viewed than those in the center or along the main path (e.g., Bitgood & Richardson, 1987).

**Implicit cues.** Circulation patterns are also influenced by more subtle cues:

7. People tend to remain on the same type of floor surface (carpet, wood) unless other forces draw them to another surface.
8. People tend to prefer the security of a main pathway and are reluctant to circulate off this pathway to areas on the periphery of the environment.

**Internal cues.** There are several internal cues that seem to influence circulation behavior:

9. There is a tendency for people to continue walking in a straight line unless some force pulls them in another direction or stops them (the principle of inertia).
10. In the absence of explicit or implicit cues or inertia, visitors (when entering a room) tend to turn right (Melton, 1935). This is referred to as the "right-turn bias."
11. Objects/displays located along the shortest route between the entrance and exit receive the greatest amount of viewing (e.g., Melton, 1935).
12. If visitors are looking for some specific objects or areas, goal seeking behavior may overpower any of the other factors described above.

### Principles of Wayfinding

**Placement of Information.** The following may apply:

1. Wayfinding information should be placed where it is needed – at critical choice points.

2. Wayfinding information should be placed so that it is not in competition with other stimuli.
3. Wayfinding information should be salient or easily noticed.

**Simplified patterns** that are congruent with the way people form cognitive maps include:

4. Environments should be designed with a minimum number of choice points.
5. The easiest circulation patterns for people to form a cognitive map are simple geometric forms such as circle, square, or cloverleaf. Intersections with angles other than 90 degrees make it more difficult to form a cognitive map. Therefore, pathways that form right angles should be preferred.

**You-are-here maps.** Following Levine's (1982) principles will make fixed maps more useful:

6. Up on the map should be associated with forward in the environment; right on the map should be right in the environment, etc.
7. A "you-are-here" mark should be provided on the map to let people know where they are.
8. Landmarks that are visible from the position of the map should be marked on the map so that the viewer can see where he/she is in relation to environmental features.

**Hand-held maps.** Hand-carried maps are preferred by visitors (e.g., Bitgood & Richardson, 1987) and are most effective if they consider the following:

9. Features on the map should be simplified as much as much possible. Too much detail causes confusion.
10. The map should include easily identified landmarks in the environment.
11. As with other visitor aides, hand-held maps should be evaluated with actual visitors.

#### Other Principles

1. Provide redundant wayfinding cues. Some visitors prefer to ask for directions, some prefer to get it on their own. Having redundant cues will increase the chance that visitors will notice cues and give him/her a choice. Recurring cues also give a feeling of security to the visitor.
2. Give people choices (information desk, maps, direction signs, etc.)
3. The use of symbols (such as animal silhouettes) to indicate directions can be confusing if used without words and if the symbols are not easily recognized. [Serrell & Jennings, 1985].

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Collected papers from the 1992 Visitor Studies Conference held in Saint Louis, Missouri.  
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