

Common Beliefs About Visitors: Do We Really Understand Our Visitors?

Stephen Bitgood
Jacksonville State University

1. Visitors always turn to the right when they enter an exhibit hall.

Melton (1935) in a series of studies found that there is a strong tendency for visitors to turn right when entering a gallery. However, he also showed that the design of the room and the visual attractiveness of objects also influence the circulation flow of visitors. Others have found similar results.

2. Control signs telling people what *not* to do really work.

Control signs (e.g., "Do not touch" and "Do not feed animals") do not appear to work by themselves. In museums, the "Do not touch" signs are usually backed up with security guards. In zoos, "Do not feed" signs are generally ignored. We believe that control signs work more effectively if they explain to visitors why they should not engage in a particular behavior. For example, telling visitors that the monkeys are on special diets decreased unauthorized feeding by 50% at the Birmingham Zoo (Bitgood, et al, 1988).

3. People can accurately estimate time in a museum or exhibit.

Surveys often ask visitors to estimate the amount of time they spent in an exhibit or museums/zoo. This information is then used for decision making (e.g., whether to add a snack bar). We have found, however, that most people overestimate the amount of time they spent at an exhibit or in a museum/zoo.

4. People never read labels.

We have found that almost everyone reads a little. And, when labels are designed effectively, labels tend to have a high probability of being read by visitors. In addition, McManus (1989) found that it is not always obvious when visitors are reading.

5. Exhibit objects speak for themselves.

Some museum professionals believe that interpretive labels are intrusive on the visitor experience and that the exhibit objects can speak for themselves. Borun & Miller (1980) showed that when labels were absent in a science exhibit, visitors were more likely to exchange misinformation than when the exhibit was accompanied by a label.

6. Visitors do not need explicit cues to tell them what order to view exhibit elements.

Exhibit designers are reluctant to develop a linear flow to exhibits believing that forced circulation patterns are undesirable. However, even more undesirable is visitor confusion. We have found that the majority of visitors prefer to be given a suggested order to view exhibits or exhibit elements.

7. Visitors will be as interested as you are in the subject matter.

Content experts usually have interests and attention spans vastly different from the usual visitor. The best way you can tell if visitors have a high interest level in a topic is to assess their interest level by conducting a front-end evaluation.

References

- Bitgood, S., Patterson, D., & Benefield, A. (1988). Exhibit design and visitor behavior: Empirical relationships. *Environment and Behavior*, 20(4), 474-491.
- Borun, M., & Miller, M. (1980). *What's in a name?* Philadelphia: Franklin Institute of Science.
- McManus, P. (1989). Oh, Yes, They Do: How Museum Visitors Read Labels and Interact with Exhibit Text. *Curator*, 32(3), 174-189.
- Melton, A. (1935). *Problems of Installation in Museums of Art*. AAM New Series No. 14. Washington, DC: American Association of Museums.

"Doing Time"

Museums, Education and Accountability

Museum Education Association
of Australia Biennial Conference
Sydney, Australia
September 30-October 4, 1991

For more information:

Robert Swieca
Powerhouse Community Services
P. O. Box K346
Haymarket NSW 2000
AUSTRALIA