EDITOR'S NOTE

This issue of *Visitor Behavior* deals with orientation and circulation. While considerable attention is given to the messages exhibitions attempt to convey and even the design of individual exhibit displays, there is often a lack of understanding concerning how people use exhibition spaces. To ensure that exhibition centers have their optimum impact on visitors, we must understand the factors that influence orientation and circulation. Ignoring these factors can result in visitor confusion, rapid fatigue, and lack of attention to exhibit displays or important exhibit elements. The contents of this special issue focus on visitor movement through the entire facility as well as through individual exhibition areas. We have attempted to extract from the literature general principles that can be applied to any exhibition setting. Most of the articles are specific to exhibition centers; however, two (Weisman on pages 10-11, Carpman on page 11-12,) are from non-exhibition settings. The relevance of these articles, however, should be obvious.

The Editors:

Sherri Lankford
Stephen Bitgood
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Voices of Visitor Studies:
Beverly Serrell

Interview by Arlene Benefield

Beverly has developed a solid reputation as an expert on labels, including authoring Making Exhibit Labels: A Step-by-Step Guide *(1983). She served on the founding Board for the Visitor Studies Association and has participated in all the Visitor Studies Conferences, as well as contributed to many other museum related organizations.*

Arlene Benefield: Tell us about this year's sabbatical.

Beverly Serrell: I needed some time to devote attention to two projects that I kept putting on the back burner. One is to re-write the book that I wrote in the early 80's. When I wrote *Making Exhibit Labels*, it was at a time when there seemed to be very few good examples of labels in museums, and now, there are lots of them. We've learned to write shorter labels; we've learned to use bigger type sizes; we're using catchy titles and questions. It's time to take the next step in terms of how much more refinement we can achieve: What other kinds of things can we be thinking about when we develop labels? So the next book will be more about the conceptual development of labels and more of the bigger picture of how labels are part of the whole process of developing exhibitions.
        I am also going to continue my research on the duration and allocation of visitors' time in exhibitions. There

are many general statements in the literature about what people are doing in exhibits that lack a large database to work off of. I am trying to encourage a lot of other people to use the same methodology in a wide variety of settings. It's a search for generalizability.

AB: Are you seeking to make the data more comparable because you will be using the same methodology?

BS: Exactly! If you have a shared methodology – the same kinds of techniques used in a variety of different situations – it allows you to make those comparisons, whereas, if one person does it one way in a certain situation and another person uses another set of tools in a different situation, it is very hard to compare.

AB: What is all this data collection going to give us?

BS: I think what it will give us is a very *realistic* picture of what is going on in museum exhibitions. What we have now is some assumptions, and perhaps delusions. The data will give us information to decide what kind of things we can do — How can we design exhibits and experiences that will *fit* the way people are actually using our museum exhibits? It seems that people are inclined to stay longer in an exhibit where they are able to enjoy, assimilate, and experience what is there in a brief period of time as opposed to being overwhelmed and saying to themselves "Gee, this exhibit was really designed for someone who has a lot more time than I have, or a lot more prior knowledge than I have. It's not for me."

AB: You're saying that you have to find out "where people are" and build on that to allow them to have a manageable experience?

BS: That is a fundamental tenet of all of the front-end evaluation work. If you can figure out where people are coming from, you can make that bridge to the next step of understanding the exhibit. My research is looking for what is typical — what the majority of people do in an exhibition. I am not talking about the "typical visitor" — I want to make that point: While there is no such thing as the "typical visitor," there are things that you can say about a population of visitors who come into a particular exhibition and what kinds of things they, as a group, typically do.

AB: So you are looking more for patterns of behavior?

BS: Patterns, tendencies, trends — within a wide diversity. The exhibit element within the exhibition that is most popular *is a pattern* that is quite clear. I am interested in getting information about the things that we as exhibit planners, designers, and evaluators have some ability to change, make better and improve, regardless of who the visitors are. What will make it more appealing, more enjoyable and, most important, more thoroughly utilized? Thorough utilization is a very practical, economic, viable measure of success. If you

put a lot of things into an exhibition that are not being used, it seems like a waste of money. Maybe this is why time data — duration and allocation studies — are not widely embraced, because it can show you some pretty stark, startling and embarrassing numbers. I would like to see, in my ideal world, museum exhibits where half of the exhibits are utilized by half of the visitors, whoever they are. I think that is a good benchmark to strive for, although it doesn't sound like much.

AB: Half sounds pretty low!

BS: When you are talking about the entire exhibition, it becomes more fair to think in pluralistic, democratic terms, and 51% is a simple majority.

AB: What exactly do you mean by the 51% Solution?

BS: There has been some misunderstanding of the term "solution." I did not mean solution as in "solving the problem," I meant solution as in a mixture — you add this, you add in some of that. It's a metaphor in terms of a *dilution*, and you want your dilution to be strong enough to have some kind of impact. It is meant in a much more flexible sense of the word than drawing a line and saying "This is it, the limit."

AB: Is 51% enough?

BS: Well, I don't think that 51% is be all and end all, but I think it is a damn good place to try and start. I want people to raise their consciousness about their assumptions and to be more aware of the decisions they are making when they are choosing which elements are going into an exhibition, especially when they make claims about learning. I think exhibitions are a wonderful informal education tool, but there are few that actually achieve the kinds of success that their makers claim for them. Let's get real, and let's be accountable. Let's talk about learning that occurs in milliseconds, not in semesters. In the article in the most recent *Museum News* by Csikszentmihályi and Hermanson called "Intrinsic Motivation in Museums: What Makes People Want to Learn?", they talk about learning and getting ready to learn, and getting down to the business of learning. It sounds like it will take about three months. Well, we've got three seconds! How can you translate the kinds of things that they are saying into the instantaneous, three-dimensional, experiential world of exhibits?

AB: We will all look forward to what you will be sharing with us at future Visitor Studies Conferences and other places, too. Speaking of the future, what do you want to see happen with the Visitor Studies Association and the Conference?

BS: What I am most excited about is having visitor studies continue to grow in two ways: (1) continue to attract and serve new members who do not know what visitor studies are, and need to know; and (2) equally, if not more importantly, to help professional development of the people who have been in the field for a number of years. One of the things that is lacking in all the other professional associations is a chance

for more open criticism, friendly and enthusiastic criticism of each other's methodology, and debate. We need a lot more really up-front sharing, criticizing and honing of each other's ideas. I know that I would like that for myself — for people to say to me what they think of the work that I have done, and help me do my job better.

AB: Any other thoughts about visitor studies?

BS: I am extremely enthusiastic about the Visitor Studies Association, and the Conferences, and the publications that are presenting the most interesting thinking in the museum field now. You (Steve and Arlene) have been good about the documentation — preserving and sharing the information that happens at those meetings. At other professional meetings, a bunch of people get together and talk for four or five days, then that's it. Okay, we have some tapes, but how many people ever get around to listening to those tapes? We end up doing the same thing over and over again. The field isn't going to move ahead as fast, or as effectively, as it could without the kinds of publications that the Center for Social Design, VSA and Steve have helped to foster.

AB: The people who buy the publications, by the way, are often not the people who attend the Conferences; those who cannot go to the meetings, as well as academic and museum libraries — that's where the bulk of the books end up.

BS: That just shows that you are disseminating information in the right directions. Keep up the good work. And send me some data for the research project, or examples of your favorite labels for the new book, OK?

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[Which visitor studies professional would you like to know more about? Send suggestions for future interview columns to Arlene Benefield at phone/FAX (205) 782-5640.]