

Chapter 20: Cheap Thrills and Quality Learning

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The Appeal of Cheap Thrills

To the scholarly few, it is a sad commentary that our society is so fascinated with pursuits which are less than academic. To others, it is not sad, but merely fact.

It is not surprising that the majority of video tape rentals are horror films such as "Faces of Death" and "Blood Beach." Nor is it surprising that sex and violence attract the attention of both young and old. In the world of visitor facilities, such obvious phenomenon should not be swept under the rug of dignity. Instead, it should be used to our advantage, carefully brought to the attention of our visitors, and cherished as a catalyst to quality learning.

Of course, too much of anything can be annoying and in the world of cheapness, downright distasteful. Just the right amount, at just the right time could be the desired winning formula!

As in most public pursuits such as advertising, newspaper headlines, and Hollywood movies, cheap thrills can make or break the success of an idea or product.

Visitor-based institutions are no different. Cheap thrills can be one of the most effective ways to capture the visitors' attention. After you have their attention, then you are in a position to deliver your educational message.

Cheap Thrills in Zoos and Museums

There are cheap thrills in art museums. Although the objects they hold are valuable and often times priceless, their attracting power can be compared to television's popular "Life Styles of the Rich and Famous." The fascination for expensive art objects and for the multimillion dollar mansions of the rich is often the same.

There are cheap thrills in zoos. Nearly every patron of a zoological park can recall circumstances involving animal violence, loud noise, or sexual activity. During such activity large audiences and long viewing times often occur. A recent visit to Zoo Atlanta exemplified this when the onset of mating tortoises (accompanied by loud moaning) increased visitation from ten to sixty-five visitors!

There are cheap thrills in Natural History museums. Although they may not be as evident as they are in other facilities, they exist, often in the form of implied animal activity and creative signage.

Through creativity, aspects of a visitor facility can benefit from its available thrills. Labels are a good example and exciting content is a good start. Such excitement should not only be found in the body of a label, but also in its captions. "Grabbers," as they are called in the newspaper business, are proven to be more effective in attracting visitor attention than traditional, descriptive labels. At the Anniston Museum of Natural History, labels entitled "You are the Wolf," "Hiss, Puff and Die," "Run for Your Life," "What Does a Grizzly Bear Eat?" and "Poison Power" are receiving an average viewing time of 30 seconds by 79% of passing visitors (Bitgood, Conroy, Pierce & Patterson, 1988). Labels with equivalent-sized print and number of words, entitled: "Hyena," "Jackal," "African Wild Dog," "Leopard," and "Lion" receive an average viewing time of 5 seconds by 12% of passing visitors according to recent data collected by a volunteer. Although many other factors are involved, it seems reasonable to assume that the "Grabbers" or "catch-phrase titles" attract more attention and are therefore more significant from an educational point of view.

The participatory and interactive nature of a label or exhibit also adds to its thrill factor. Label copy that includes visual comparisons helps. At the University of Georgia, a label from a hallway whale vertebra exhibit caused 95% of readers to react after reading that the whale's original size was "...from where you now stand, to the soda machine down the hall."

The content of an exhibit can get a visitor involved. Those including tactile experience, sensory stimulation, exhibit response, or interactive replies are extremely memorable. Some of the most significant exhibit-based, cheap thrills were researched by Steve Bitgood and Don Patterson (1987). In their article, "Principles of Exhibit Design," they outlined the following principles:

- Larger objects or animals produce longer viewing times than smaller ones.
- Moving objects or animals produce longer viewing times than stationary ones.
- Exhibit objects or animals that are novel attract more attention than common ones.
- There are certain qualities of an exhibit object or animal that are intrinsically interesting (i.e., baby animals, dangerous animals, or valuable objects).

Although the utilization of cheap thrills is widely acceptable, its range is limited. An example of this limitation occurred when a delicate situation found its way to the Anniston Museum of Natural History in 1987. An alligator, killed because it had attacked and mauled a man, was donated to the Museum. The dramatic attack had received national media attention and as a result the morbidly curious began to call the Museum in hopes of seeing the alligator's mounted body. Had the Museum promoted the attack, visitation would have soared. It might have been good press for the Museum but bad press for the species. In fact, alligator attacks are uncommon and, because of this, the Museum exhibit made no mention of the attack. The Museum took a further step to extinguish wild alligator worries by hosting a panel discussion of biologists and wildlife enforcement officers.

Conclusion

Cheap thrills do have their place in exhibition. Things that are perceived of as being special, dangerous, off-color, or exciting (at no extra cost to the visitor) reliably gain attention. Once we have the attention of visitors, we can teach them. Attractions that need a little extra something to get the visitors' attention may profit from a little cheapness!

References

- Bitgood, S., Conroy, P., Pierce, M., & Patterson, D. (1988). Evaluation of "Attack and Defense" at the Anniston Museum of Natural History. Unpublished Manuscript. Jacksonville State University.
- Bitgood, S. & Patterson, D. (1987). Principles of Exhibit Design. Visitor Behavior, 2(1), 4-6.