

“Characteristics of Ideal Museum Exhibits”

M. B. Alt & K. M. Shaw (1984)
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Summarized by
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Introduction

Alt and Shaw attempted to classify museum exhibits in terms of “the way they are perceived by museum visitors.” The focus of this investigation was to attempt to clarify the perceived characteristics visitors associate with museum exhibits and to measure the extent to which ‘real’ exhibits are similar to the characteristics they associate with an ‘ideal’ exhibit.

In the first of two studies, 20 visitors were taken to three exhibits and an exhaustive list of exhibit characteristics were evoked. Forty-five exhibits out of 120 exhibits in the Hall of Human Biology at the British Museum (Natural History) were chosen based on their broad representation of types. Each visitor was taken back into the exhibition and invited to study three exhibits. An elicitation interview asked the following question: ‘Please tell me anything that strikes you particularly about the exhibit.’ Verbatim answers were recorded until each visitor had exhausted his or her comments about the exhibit.

There were three purposes to the second study: (1) using the list of attributes generated in Study 1 (plus three attributes relating to the physical characteristics of exhibits and two attributes to check reliability), to measure the perceived appropriateness of the attributes to the 45 exhibits and to an ideal exhibit; (2) to discover the similarities between exhibits and their distances from the ideal in terms of the relative appropriateness of the attributes; and (3) to investigate the relationship between the exhibits’ proximity to the ideal and their attracting and holding powers.

A total of 1980 adult visitors were selected as they were leaving the Hall of Human Biology. Each visitor was asked to judge three of the 45 exhibits across the attributes generated in the first study (see Table 1 for example items). After viewing the first exhibit, the visitor was handed a set of cards on which were printed the list of exhibit attributes with five or six attributes printed on each card, and each card was preceded by the following question: ‘In your opinion which, if any, of these descriptions apply to this display?’ After the visitor completed the task, the procedure was repeated with the second exhibit. For the ideal exhibit, the visitor was taken out of the exhibition and was asked the following question: ‘Now I’d like you to imagine what you think is an ideal display for the Human Biology exhibition and tell me which, if any, of the descriptions on this card would apply to the ideal exhibit.’

The attribute list was reduced to 23 attributes because of redundancy. The items on this reduced list are shown in Table 1. Results were plotted in a way that compared the ideal exhibit characteristics with each exhibit studied in the Hall of Human Biology. Items that strongly apply to the ideal exhibit included: “It makes the subject come to life;” “You can understand the point/s it is making quickly;” “There’s something in it for all ages;” “It’s a memorable exhibit;” and “It’s above the average standard of exhibit in this exhibition.” Those items strongly negatively related to the ideal were: “It’s badly placed;” “It doesn’t give enough information;” “Your attention is distracted from it by other displays;” and “It’s confusing.”

Discussion

This research suggests that there are a number of exhibit factors of greater importance than interaction or participation. Some of the characteristics of ideal exhibits as measured here are incompatible with the design of successful interactive exhibits in the Hall of Human Biology. At a glance, it seems that visitors are attracted to exhibits which deliver a short clear message, displayed in a vivid manner. This finding appears to be incompatible with the success of participatory exhibits which demand a longer investment of visitors’ time. However, it is possible to have different patterns of “ideal” exhibits coexist – an ideal participatory exhibit requiring more time and an ideal static exhibit less time.

Table 1.
Reduced list of items used in Study 2

2. *It takes a long time to see it (or listen to it) completely*
7. *It’s a difficult subject to understand*
13. *It doesn’t move*
17. *It doesn’t give enough information*
18. *It’s artistic*
19. *It uses familiar things or experiences to make the point*
21. *It’s confusing*
22. *There’s something in it for all ages*
23. *It’s a memorable exhibit*
24. *It involves you*
25. *It deals with a complicated subjects*
26. *It’s good fun*
27. *It’s brightly lit*
31. *It deals with the subject better than textbooks do*
34. *It makes the subject come to life*
36. *It’s badly placed-you wouldn’t notice it easily*
38. *If you arrive when one or two others are looking at it (or listening to it) you can’t see (or hear) it properly*
42. *It teaches without being too serious*
43. *Your attention is distracted from it by other displays*
45. *It makes a difficult subject easier*
46. *You can take it at your own pace*
49. *You can understand the point/s it is making very quickly*
53. *It’s above the average standard of exhibit in this exhibition*