

Hirschi, K.D., and Screven, C.G. (1988).
Effects of Questions on Visitor Reading
Behavior. *ILVS Review*, 1/1, 50-61.

Summarized by
Don Thompson
Center for Social Design

Most museum exhibits are intended to educate visitors. In order for visitors to learn, exhibits generally require that visitors read informational labels. Unfortunately, studies have shown that few visitors take the time to read and comprehend what is written. While a number of techniques have been proposed for getting visitors to read, their relative effectiveness is largely unknown. Hirschi and Screven attempted to provide some empirical evidence for one of these techniques by studying the use of labels which ask questions.

The study was conducted with family groups of visitors to five different exhibits at the Milwaukee Public Museum. Families were unobtrusively tracked as they passed through the five exhibit areas, and the amount of time they spent reading and viewing the exhibits was recorded. For each exhibit, Hirschi and Screven also developed a short add-on label which asked a question which could be answered by reading the information which was already present—for example, "Do Bears Hibernate?", and "Did Japanese Women Commit Hari-kari?"

These labels were then placed in the exhibits and family groups were again timed as they passed through each exhibit area. Comparison of non-question reading times to question reading times showed an increase of over 1,300 percent—from a mean across all exhibits of 6.6 seconds without questions to 95 seconds with questions. In addition, families who viewed the exhibits which had questions tended to stay and view the rest of the exhibit for a longer period of time.

It was hypothesized that non-question labels received such poor reading times for reasons previously suggested by Screven (1986) including:

- The labels were poorly located and out of the natural line of sight.
- Most of the labels were not located near the objects they described.
- The labels were long and crowded.
- The labels included technical terminology.
- Most labels did not directly relate to the exhibit objects.

While the study did not attempt to determine whether an increase in reading actually meant that visitors learned more, it was apparent that the use of questions worked well as a device to get them to stop and focus their attention. Beyond that, it was suggested that other factors relating to the informational content of the labels would determine learning—in particular whether or not they provide information which is related to the knowledge and experiences of visitors.

September 21-24, 1993

ANNOUNCEMENT

Science Museum, London, UNITED KINGDOM

Conference Title: *Visitor Studies in the 1990s*

The Science Museum will hold a two-day international conference on visitor studies' theory and practice, followed by two days of workshops.

Key papers from the leaders in the field of visitor studies will highlight current areas of debate, such as issues of good practice and what the future holds.

For further details please contact:

Sandra Bicknell
Interpretation Unit
Science Museum
South Kensington, London
SW7 2DD, United Kingdom
Phone: (+44) 71-938 8092
FAX: (+44) 71-938 8118