

[Continued from page 11]

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The Process and Effects of Word-of-Mouth Communication at a History Museum

G. Donald Adams
Master's Degree
Boston University

This exploratory study attempted to document the importance of word-of-mouth in making people aware of museums and influencing them to visit. One aspect of the study developed a methodology for evaluating whether or not word-of-mouth messages among visitors is consistent with the actual communication messages and onsite programs of the museum. One-half of the respondents received messages of the museum's market position and education mission. Results indicated that visitors did not communicate the targeted pre-visit word-of-mouth messages.

In another part of this thesis, Adams reported on a study of the current practice of museum public relations. A survey of public relations specialists revealed some interesting facts on the practice of public relations and marketing in museums. For example, Adams found that little time was spent by public relations specialists researching audiences to determine their perceptions of the museum and its programs. In addition, public relations department time allocation appeared to differ among museums as a function of type of museum and annual attendance. "... Art museum public relations practitioners spend more time publicizing special exhibits and events and responding to information requests from the media, while their history museum colleagues spend more time writing copy for publications and researching visitor impressions." (p. 152).

Adams' 232-page thesis is rich with references to literature and data. Museum professionals should find this document both interesting and useful.

An Ecological Approach to the Study of Zoo Visitor Behavior: Implications for Environmental Management and Design

Suzanne Hodges
Master's Thesis
Virginia Polytechnic Institute

This study was conducted in a small children's zoo in Roanoke, Virginia. Visitors were observed between 11 am and 3 pm in July and August of 1977. During the baseline phase, visitors' behavior was recorded before signs were changed. In the second phase, signs were enlarged and the number of words in the text was decreased.

The results can be summarized as follows:

- adults stayed at exhibits longer and were more likely to read labels than were children;
- children spent more time attempting to attract the animal's attention than adults;
- both the size of the sign and the number of words in the sign affected visitor reading.

The Influence of Zoo Environments on Perceptions of Animals

Ted W. Finlay
Master's Thesis
Georgia Institute of Technology

This study evaluated the effects of background setting on the perceptions of animals. Individuals rated animals on a bipolar adjective scale after viewing slides of animals in one of three types of settings: wild, naturalistic zoo, or caged zoo. The bipolar adjectives included: harmful-harmless, graceful-clumsy, free-restricted, active-passive, unfriendly-friendly, tame-wild, common-unusual, energetic-lazy, ugly-beautiful, powerful-weak, and healthy-unhealthy. A control group rated the animals but did not view slides.

The major results were summarized as follows:

"1. Animals viewed in traditional zoo cages were rated different from and less favorably than animals in either the wild or control groups. Zoo animals were seen as restricted, tame, and passive whereas wild animals were characterized as free, wild, and active.

2. Animals in naturalistic zoo settings were rated more similar to wild animals along the dimension of Free-Restricted than to zoo animals if no visible confinement barrier was present." [page 61]