THE ROLE OF VISITOR EVALUATION IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF EXHIBIT LABELS

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Without evaluation it is unlikely that successful labels will be developed. Evaluation is critical both at the planning and development stages of labeling. "Front-end evaluation" is the term used to describe evaluation efforts during the planning stage and "formative evaluation" is generally used to describe trial testing of labels during the development stage.

Front-end Evaluation

As stated by Griggs (1984), "Front-end evaluation aims to identify and eliminate errors *before* they arise."

Front-end evaluation generally attempts to answer three questions about the intended audience: "What do they already know?" "How much interest do they have in the subject matter?" and "Do they have any misconceptions about the subject matter?"

There are several methods of conducting front-end evaluations, for example: asking visitors what they know about a subject; surveying visitors' interest in a subject; unobtrusively listening to visitors talk about the exhibit.

Formative Evaluation

Once you know your audience, the next step is to trial test some of the design concepts. Both the content of the labels and physical factors (placement, length, lighting) can be tested if there is any doubt about visitor reactions. Evaluation during this stage can identify errors. Simple changes can be made before the major cost of final installation. Three essential ingredientes for successful formative evaluation are: pretesting key ideas, low-cost mockups of labels, and making adjustments based on trial testing.

Conclusions

If front-end and formative evaluation are included in exhibit label development, the product should be effective. Otherwise museums must depend upon guessing what visitors know and how they will intepret information. Evaluation provides a much safer and less embarassing route of determining visitor reactions. The reader who is unfamiliar with these evaluation approaches should consult the suggested readings below.

SUGGESTED READINGS

Bitgood, S. (1989). Formative evaluation. *AAZPA 1989 Proceedings*. Pittsburgh, PA.

Griggs, S. (1984). Evaluating exhibitions. In J. Thompson (Ed.), *Manual of curatorship: A guide to museum practice*. London: Butterworth's. pp. 412-422.

Loomis, R. (1987). *Museum visitor evaluation: New tool for museum management*. Nashville, TN: American Association for State & Local History.

Miles, R. (1988). Exhibit evaluation in the British Museum (Natural History). *ILVS Review: A Journal of Visitor Behavior*, 1(1), 24-33.

Screven, C. (1989). Formative evaluation: Conceptions and misconceptions. In S. Bitgood, J. Roper, & A. Benefield (Eds.), *Visitor studies–1988: Theory, research, and practice*. Jacksonville, AL: Center for Social Design. pp. 109-137.

Shettel, H. (1989). Front-end evaluation: Another useful tool? *AAZPA 1989 Proceedings*. Pittsburgh, PA.