

VISITOR BEHAVIOR IN A JAPANESE GARDEN

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Introduction

The Japanese Garden is the most highly visited area at the Chicago Botanic Garden. The purposes of the study were to evaluate which exhibit objects attracted visitor interest, to develop interpretive materials based on visitor interest, and evaluate the effectiveness of the interpretive materials.

The study was divided into three segments: a front-line evaluation using the survey method; a comparison of illustrated versus non-illustrated interpretive labels by direct observation of visitors; and an evaluation of a motivator sheet using direct observation of visitors. The motivator sheet had illustrations and title descriptions of the objects in the Garden that were labeled. The title of the sheet said "Welcome... During your visit look for these special features.").

Method

The front-line evaluation was conducted with a sample of 100 randomly chosen visitors as they exited the Garden. Using illustrations of objects in the Garden, visitors were asked which objects they remembered seeing and which they were curious about. Of the objects visitors were curious about, they were asked to articulate what they wanted to know. Staff felt it would be too strenuous for visitors to explain on their own what they found interesting. Much of what was displayed in the Japanese Garden would be difficult to describe because the public is unfamiliar with the objects.

For the last two segments of the study observations were recorded at three locations in the Garden. The locations were chosen for their visual accessibility to all seven objects and interpretive labels. Observers recorded if a visitor stopped for three or more seconds at a label (stopping power), for how long they stopped and for how long they read the label (holding power). Prior to collecting the data, each label was tested for actual reading time. Holding power was calculated by dividing the Average Time Spent Reading by the Time Required to Read the Label (Screven, 1976). A total of 800 randomly chosen visitors were observed.

Results and Discussion

Front-line evaluation. The exit survey found that 7 of 15 objects held an average and above average level of curiosity for the visitor. Twenty-four percent of the visitors expressed no curiosity about any objects, 22 percent said they were interested in one object, 23 percent

in two, and 13 percent in three objects. Few individuals were interested in any more than three objects. These results were used to determine which objects should be accompanied by interpretive labels and seven mock-ups were produced and installed in the Garden.

Effects of illustrations and motivator sheets. The presence of an illustration on the label made little difference in whether visitors stopped at the label. In fact, those labels without an illustration had a slightly higher stopping power. The non-illustrated labels were used for the remainder of the study. The motivator sheet increased the stopping power for all the objects and interpretive labels with one exception. When five additional labels were added to the site, stopping power decreased considerably with three of the seven labels, and slightly with the remaining four. This suggests that visitors do have a saturation point. This study did not measure how much reading occurred with the additional labels, only the effect they had on the seven original labels.

Holding power with each variable was also calculated. The labels maintained a high holding power throughout the study. Although stopping power decreased with additional labels, those visitors who were motivated to stop took the time to read the label. This indicates that the labels were successful with the interested public in terms of motivating them to stop and read the label. The addition of the motivator sheet increased the holding power on all but two of the labels. When additional labels were added to the site, only slight changes in holding power were recorded.

Conclusion

This study included visitor input when designing the interpretive materials. The high percentages of people that stopped at the labels, the decrease in stopping power with the additional labels, and the overall holding power of the labels indicate that visitor involvement in program development can have a positive result. The interpretive material that was prepared considered visitor interests and questions about particular objects. When additional labels were added, fewer visitors showed an interest in those subjects. The level of energy visitors have to expend in an exhibit may be limited. The additional labels may have infringed on that limit. Distribution of a motivator sheet was able to increase the stopping power, and in most cases the holding power, of the labels.

Reference

Screven, C. (1976). Exhibit evaluation: A goal-referenced approach. *Curator*, 19(4): 271-290.

**HAVE YOU RENEWED YOUR
SUBSCRIPTION TO VISITOR
BEHAVIOR?**