

# **Focus Groups With Zoo Visitors Who Are Blind or Have Low Vision: How Can We Deliver Our Messages to Those Who Cannot See Signs?**

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The Americans With Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines (ADA/AG) recognizes that Braille and tactile signage are not always practical:

*“Accessible signage with descriptive materials about public buildings, monuments, and objects of cultural interest may not provide sufficiently detailed and meaningful information. Interpretive guides, audio tape devices, or other methods may be more effective in presenting such information.”*

In 1993, Brookfield Zoo, being committed to providing excellent experiences for audiences with visual disabilities, set out to determine which would be the best means of communication.

## **Project Description**

Surveying casual visitors with visual disabilities was not practical because the number of blind people visiting the Zoo was very low. Also, we wanted to probe for in-depth information. We decided to hold a series of six focus groups.

The participants in the first two groups were adults: one group of totally blind individuals and one group of people with severe visual impairments but some sight. Each session lasted one day. Participants were interviewed at length, verbally oriented to the zoo, then escorted through a variety of existing zoo exhibits. They were questioned on the tram after each experience.

We then developed some sample materials to test different media (including Braille, large print, and audio) and different kinds of messages. We wanted to know how the participants would respond to a) the same information that signs provide to sighted visitors, b) sensory-oriented descriptions, and c) general information on the topic (texts which need not be changed when species change).

The second two focus groups, held on the same day, were with older children with mixed levels of visual impairment ranging from totally blind at birth to having only residual sight from a younger age. One group was toured around the zoo while the other worked with us in our Australia House. When both had met with us, we combined the groups for additional Zoo experiences, including touching a live animal. At the end of the day we tested some tactile materials and discussed the children's overall impressions.

Most of the fifth group were elderly and had some physical problems in addition to having lost most or all of their sight. We tested the same Australia House materials.

Finally, we brought back participants from the first groups of adults and tried out the Australian materials on them.

### **Experimenting With a New Kind of Focus Group**

To the best of our knowledge at that time, no one with experience in focus group techniques had worked with groups of blind people.

We worked with Louise Wood, an outside moderator, who found it challenging to control one overly assertive participant. Her usual techniques for handling too-dominant individuals include body language that has no effect on people who can't see your hands and posture.

Some participants required escorts; team members played this role, gracefully allowing us to be in the room during the conversations. No one-way mirror was needed as long as we kept quiet (those participants with some sight did not have enough vision to pick up facial expressions). Our jobs at the Zoo were not announced until the end of each session.

The participants, recruited through local organizations and a school for people with visual disabilities, were picked up in a zoo van, and provided with lunch.

They expressed gratification at our seeking their input and were only too eager to please, which could have led to false positives. It was important to offer choices for comparison, so that negative comments

could be solicited. A text praised when first introduced was likely to be disparaged when a more lively alternative was presented.

Most details required only a bit of creative adjusting. For example, focus group participants are often asked to write ranking numbers so that their initial reactions can be captured before they start influencing each other. Our participants would have had difficulty writing, so they held up fingers to indicate rankings; but since they could not see each other (even those with residual vision could not see this kind of detail), the effect was the same.

## Conclusions

1. There is no one audience of people with visual disabilities. There are many different groups with very different, sometimes conflicting, needs and interests. Important influences include the point in his or her life a person lost vision, how complete the vision loss has been, and what level of personal independence and political awareness a person has.

2. Only a small minority currently read Braille. Some of the participants in our focus groups were adamant that Braille should be more present in our culture. They argued that we should encourage children to learn Braille to become literate, increasing their ability to function as equal members of our society. However, even Braille readers often preferred audio because it is quicker, and because it makes them feel less conspicuous. Large-type handouts are also conspicuous, and are useless in nocturnal or other spaces that must be dimly lit. Audio is close to a universal solution (we have concluded that visitors with neither sight nor hearing should contact the education department for a special program). Audio interpretation can provide a valuable experience for sighted visitors as well. This was surprisingly important to all of the groups.

3. Making Brookfield Zoo, 200 acres of mainly natural park, easily accessible to unaccompanied blind visitors is not readily achievable, but there are things we can do. None of the participants were optimistic about using a stationary map for actual wayfinding, but three-dimensional maps may have a role. Blind visitors are too often left feeling lost in an amorphous space because they cannot skim a map the way sighted people do. If visitors were provided with a very simplified tactile map, small enough to fit within their two hands, it might provide a useful conceptual overview to a park's layout. We can provide, by appointment, tour guides

for blind visitors who do not come with sighted friends. Docents, if available, would enrich the tour by adding natural history information. Guides are also useful for reading, describing, and pointing out animals for viewing through a monocular (special lens carried by some legally blind people).

4. Those with a little sight were eager for opportunities to use it: one took photographs of animals so that she could later see what we'd been pointing at. However, some participants felt that we should avoid any interpretation techniques that involve sight, arguing that we cannot make equivalent experiences for them unless other senses are substituted.

5. Providing guides would not excuse us from also providing direct experiences for these guests. They are hungry for experience and information gained through touch (docent stations with artifacts are wonderful), hearing, smelling, and just being in a different atmosphere. They loved the very naturalistic Tropic World for its sensory impact. In some other exhibits: "I might as well be waiting for a bus."

6. Getting the same information that is supplied on signs for the general public was not a value in itself. Even when probed, none of the participants expressed feelings that it was important to be exposed to the same things signs contain. The participants were more interested in making the interpretation provided to them useful to everyone. Generalized information (the easiest for us to maintain) was OK, but descriptions of animals and exhibits were very powerful. Size comparisons should be with familiar objects, and colors were of interest to many. Supplying some context in natural history and/or conservation related information was considered desirable. The descriptive messages have the added benefits of enriching exhibits for sighted visitors, and helping sighted visitors find inactive animals. No one felt the absence of detailed information like scientific names. In some cases we were as vague as "an animal related to the kangaroo," and were not challenged.

7. Detailed, three-dimensional sculpture is terrific, but some adults hesitated to touch it. When they did, they learned a great deal about the animal depicted, discovered misconceptions they had held for years, and expressed wonder. Sculpture does not need to be life-sized, although that is ideal. A reasonable level of realism and detailing is more important. Two-dimensional cut-outs shaped like animals are of very limited value, unless used to make a specific point, e.g. "Feel the length of this animal's neck." Silhouettes painted in high contrast worked better than cut-out

shapes for visitors with some sight, and were suggested as an introduction to each exhibit.

8. While all of the participants understood the necessity of keeping nocturnal exhibits dark, low light levels caused many problems, especially when the change from outdoors was sudden. Lighting details should be considered carefully.

9. The design team gained a shared vocabulary and a set of assumptions we hold in common, and felt renewed commitment to developing universally accessible interpretation.

### References

U.S. Department of Justice. (1990). *Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (Appendix B: ADA Accessibility Guidelines, A4.30.4)*. Washington DC: Author.

### Author Note

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