

Through the Eyes of the Guest: How Guest Services Can Influence the Visitor Studies Agenda

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The Saint Louis Zoo is one of the few free zoological parks in the country. Each year we get approximately 2.8 million visitors. The Zoo's Guest Services division:

- sells tickets for the Children's Zoo, train, and sea lion shows, and sells some small sundry items;
- rents strollers and wheelchairs;
- staffs and manages two parking lots;
- manages guest relations, guest feedback, and visitor surveys; and
- provides hosts at main entrances.

Today's panel discussion on "Influencing the Agenda" for visitor studies, from a guest services perspective, set forth three premises:

- Part of the Guest Services director's job is to be an advocate for appropriate and appealing visitor services.
- The guest services perspective must view the institution as a whole (as contrasted with looking at one exhibit at a time).
- This holistic approach to the institution can perhaps guide visitor studies into new directions.

There are some facts of life that we, as a public institution, face. First, leisure time is scarce these days. People have daily pressures and responsibilities that force them to choose carefully how they will spend this time. Second, quality is important. People are looking for more than fun—they want an exciting experience which also enriches. At a zoo, they want entertainment which also tells them about nature and animals. We must compete for visitors by providing them with this kind of experience. If we can do it, we will build not only attendance, but also awareness, understanding, and commitment to conservation.

A key component in creating this experience is serving all the guests' needs. A positive guest experience and an emotionally powerful visit can have a tremendous impact on learning. So where can the "guest service perspective" influence this learning process? Here are four areas:

- Arrival experience: setting the tone to accomplish your goals.

- Setting: physical layout and the ability of guests to find their way around.
- “Moments of Truth:” the encounters between guests and employees.
- Theming, entertaining: leading guests to learning and commitment.

Each of these areas raises questions that Guest Services professionals must consider, not only in terms of institutional design or remodeling, but also in the day-to-day management of the operation. We hope that visitor studies can help address these issues, improving the guests' experience and helping institutions achieve their educational mission.

Arrival Experience

What do visitors expect of an institution before they arrive? How will those preconceptions (and plans made because of them) affect the visit? Thinking about setting the guests' expectations, I am reminded of one of my neighborhood restaurants, whose menu reads, “We enjoy only well-behaved children that stay in their seats. We do not accept out of town checks and no, we don't care if it is your birthday. Leave your attitude somewhere else and remember, waiting for pizza here is a tradition. Enjoy your meal.” Clearly the tone of such an announcement gives one a sense of the personality of the restaurant: here are the rules that you have to follow in order to have the privilege of eating here—don't ask us to go out of our way for you! Are we sending similar, if perhaps less obvious, messages to our visitors?

What are the guests' experience as they enter? Do we meet or exceed their expectations? Disappoint them? Anger them? Might they be pleasantly surprised by pricing, or by a special event or attentive service? And if so, doesn't that help set a positive tone for the entire visit? Conversely, do we post “DO NOT” signs everywhere around the entrance? Are there stern-looking security guards waiting by our doors? Do we have a graphic identity at the entrance that sets the tone for the entire institution? Does the entrance prepare people physically and emotionally for the experience they are about to have? Contrast these two arrival scenarios:

You enter a parking lot with poor signage and an attendant sullenly takes your money and waves you through. As you and your family approach the imposing building, you look around and spot security officers, who point out the admissions desk only after you are able to get their attention. You part with some money, accept a visitor guide and stand there trying to figure out where the restrooms are. You ask a janitor for directions and are sent to the wrong floor...OR...

When you pull into the parking lot you find easy to read information, a friendly attendant, and you notice that the lot is immaculate. When you approach the building entrance, you are greeted by a host, who asks if you've visited before and gives you a map. If you're new, she gives you a brief overview of the facility. Signs are enhanced by a distinctive logo, and

directions to major areas of interest are clearly shown. The coat check, stroller rental and restrooms are conveniently nearby.

Which of these two experiences put our guests in a frame of mind to learn and enjoy?

Setting

We all have weaknesses in our physical layouts—but do we know where they are? Have we researched where and how guests get lost or confused? Once problems are discovered, do we solve them using graphics or people? How do we give directions to visitors? Do we attempt to reach guests in more than one way? What is an easy-to-read map? Are visitor amenities like restrooms well-marked? Is it better to hand out maps, or rely on directional markers? In terms of design, how do we take into account the cumulative experience of exhibits—their proximity to one another, or to other desirable locations, the density of exhibits in a particular area, and the influence that has on total time spent? What graphics, audio, or video can be used to attract visitors to places where you want them to read or listen? How do circulation or traffic patterns, lighting, and furnishings affect length of stay? How shall we place amenities (e.g. food or gifts) to help reduce fatigue? The use of computer interactive video for providing guest information is becoming more common. Does it work? What formats are best? Is two-way video a better solution?

Designing with the guest's perspective and naiveté in mind is an ideal procedure. However, existing facilities and exhibits can benefit tremendously from information gleaned by observing visitors' behavior and comments as they move through a particular area. Although this technique is used to evaluate exhibits, it can also provide invaluable information for guest services professionals. And, if we increase visitors' understanding of their surroundings and their comfort level, the entire institution benefits.

“Moments of Truth”

“Moments of Truth” is a phrase coined by Jan Carlsson, CEO of SAS Airlines, to describe those hundreds of times a day when employees and guests interact. Each moment, by itself, may not be significant. But the cumulative effect can make or break a visit. Do moments of truth affect learning? How can our employees influence visitor behavior? If a guest asks an employee for directions or information, are we sure they will get correct answers to their questions? Do we train all employees to be able to describe accurately and appealingly the latest exhibit? Do employees know the exciting activities going on today? Do we encourage employees to identify a favorite exhibit so that they have a ready answer for the question, “What should I be sure to see today?”

If employees are less than enthusiastic, if they appear bored by their work, if they are misinformed or uninformed, visitors will quickly come to the conclusion that the institution has little to offer that is fun or interesting. Worse, an institution with truly spectacular exhibits can still be

a turn-off for visitors who find no one to assist them, or whose contacts with indifferent employees in gift shops, food service, and the like convince them that the institution is not interested in them. It is no secret that companies such as Nordstrom's department stores and Walt Disney have created their tremendous success by doing everything possible to know and exceed their customers' expectations, to ensure that they have nothing less than a wonderful experience. This philosophy must be implemented by front-line employees—the very employees that institutions such as ours may tend to ignore.

Theming and Entertainment

Perhaps informal education happens most effectively when great entertainment serves as the vehicle for personal exploration and self-discovery. Achieving this dynamic combination is what makes a visit memorable and fun. In these competitive times, it is no longer enough to say that a particular exhibit fulfills this goal. Instead, guest services professionals, along with designers and educators, can look at the entire facility or campus, suggesting opportunities to enrich learning through the use of theming and entertainment.

Theming an area means making every detail conform to the message you want to send. It can include sights, smells, sounds, employee or volunteer uniforms, wall colors, display materials and graphics, and so forth. If we know at the outset the message we want to impart, we should arrange it so the visitor discovers a story. Can we “choreograph” a visit? We know that powerful emotions can affect learning. Can we calibrate the emotional intensity of the visit? If so, how? Perhaps by the arrangement of exhibits within a space? Can we use theming to teach even while people are not looking at an exhibit? How might we reach people who are standing in line? Can we immerse visitors in a particular experience through the use of theming? For example, can we show an introductory video? Plant the seeds of inquiry by asking leading questions? If the entire visit can be structured (e.g. formal introduction, active exploration, and conclusion) will visitors be more engaged or learn more? Sometimes the most subtle touches can convey more than complicated graphics—and our attention to these details can turn an ordinary visit into a magical one.

Creating a positive guest experience requires constant attention to training, design, procedures, and particularly the total picture: the product we offer and the way we offer it. Ultimately, improving the guests' interface with the institution is going to increase their enjoyment and their ability to learn, leading to increased length of stay, repeat visits, and greater involvement with our organization. As we study our visitors in informal learning environments, looking at the many individual exhibits and components, let us not lose sight of the whole, with its myriad opportunities for leading guests to learning, and from learning to commitment.