

The Relevance of the Consumer Research Literature to the Visitor Studies Field: The Case of Involvement

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Although I am not in the museum field, I have been hanging around museums for a number of years. I used to spend hours observing museum visitors, but never knew there was anyone else interested in this strange behavior, until I heard of Chan Screven, who put me onto what was at the time a brand new group, and a growing body of visitor studies literature.

Consumer and Museum Research Overlap

More recently, in the course of my work as a Professor of Psychology, I began work on a text in consumer psychology, and became struck with the parallel lines that researchers in the two areas were following. And yet, I was also struck with the fact that the researchers in each field seemed to be unaware of the studies in the other. For example, I don't know of any research studies in the consumer behavior area that have referenced even one study from the visitor studies field, though many are relevant. Even in the consumer behavior texts, and there are about a dozen currently in print, only one to my knowledge has such a reference and that is to Melton's pioneering studies.

On the other hand, research that appears in the visitor studies field seldom cites references from the advertising, marketing, or consumer behavior journals, though they often exist on the same subject. When I have on occasion mentioned this state of affairs to museum people, as for example last year at this conference, I have received quizzical looks that nonverbally suggest that I am out of touch with what visitor studies are all about. One such contact guessed that I should talk to the marketing people on the museum staff. I decided then that (1) I was not communicating very well, and (2) I had an obligation to open the doors of the consumer behavior literature to the visitor studies field.

I am specifically *not* speaking here to and for museum marketers. There is much here for marketing people, of course, but they are much more likely to be aware of these journals. But, they, too, do not realize the

relevance for exhibit design. In other words, what I am suggesting is that this rich source of information would be very useful to exhibit planners, not just marketers.

Relevance of the Consumer Literature

Let me start with a closer look at the connection, for the relevance of the consumer literature to the design of exhibits is certainly not intuitively clear. First, consider if you will the task of exhibit designers. They are trying to communicate an idea, or group of ideas, to a fleeting audience. They often have only a few seconds to catch the visitor's attention, deliver the message, and hope that there is some payoff later in time.

But this is exactly what advertisers are also doing. They too have only a few seconds to deliver a message. They too are mostly concerned with ways of getting and holding attention. They too hope that the message will translate into behavior at some future point in time. These two tasks are in fact the same. The product differs, but the process is identical.

For the last 80 years, particularly, advertisers have done considerable research to discover exactly how to make this process maximally efficient and cost effective. Their consumers are the purchasers of the products that they advertise, while in the museum field the consumers are the museum visitors, and the product is the content of the museum exhibits. In other words, when we study museum visitors, we are also studying consumers. The point is that the procedure for rapid effective communication is the same regardless of the "product." The principles that describe one set of consumers have considerable relevance to the other set as well. To do justice to the relevance would take longer than I am allotted.

For starters you might consider general books on advertising or marketing displays. For example, Ogilvy (1985) in his book, *Ogilvy on Advertising*, lists about 20 principles to guide the typography of print ads, and make them more easily read. Most of his points are equally relevant to exhibit signage.

Involvement

In assessing the effectiveness of an exhibit, learning measures are commonly taken, as well as two attention measures: attention getting and attention holding. It turns out that while a number of factors can get our attention, the key to holding power and to message transfer is a process called involvement. It therefore is a topic that exhibit designers should know more about. In recent years, involvement has received considerable attention in the consumer research literature, because, not surprisingly, the key to advertising's effectiveness has also been found to come down to involvement. The studies have focused on finding out what makes things involving.

The starting point of the meaning of involvement seems to be a book by the social psychologists Sherif and Hovland (1961) in which they used the term and meant by it the degree of linkage to strong beliefs and ego-involving attitudes. Krugman (1965) expanded the term a bit, not limiting the term to ego-involvement, but defining involvement as, "The number of conscious 'bridging experiences,' connections, or personal references per minute that the viewer makes between his own life and the stimulus" (p. 355).

Mitchell (1979) sees involvement not so much in terms of cognitive connections, but as arousal—from any stimuli, not necessarily from ego-related stimuli alone. Burnkrant and Sawyer (1983) similarly mean arousal, but the kind which gets us to look for information, and they call it "information-processing intensity." Both of these latter definitions emphasize the increased motivational energy involvement brings, and they yet do not dispute the role of personal relevance as the source of that energy. Greenwald and Leavitt (1984), after summarizing a number of these approaches (see also Antil, 1984; Muncy & Hunt, 1984, for reviews) write, "There is consensus that high involvement means (approximately) personal relevance or importance" (p. 583). The word "importance" taps into the arousal factor noted. There is still discussion over whether personal relevance causes affect or feeling, or whether it is the other way around, so that the sensing of affect tells us of personal relevance.

Laurent and Kapferer (1985) have analyzed the major components of product involvement, and find them to be:

- 1) the personal meaning of the product;
- 2) the symbolic value attributed to the product's use;
- 3) the ability of the product to provide pleasure;
- 4) the perceived importance of negative consequences in the case of wrong choice; and
- 5) the perceived probability of making such a mistake.

These come down to essentially two factors: things that make a product important to us (personal meaning, symbolic value, or emotional appeal), and assessment of the personal risk involved in the product's use. Since there is very little risk involved in museum exhibits, the key to involvement becomes the personal importance things have, and to understand it we therefore need a closer look at affect, because affect or feeling is the way our system reminds us that something has importance.

Before going on, however, let me just emphasize the sources so far. Burnkrant and Sawyer were writing in the book, *Information Processing Research in Advertising*. Krugman published in the *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Mitchell and others in the series, *Advances in Consumer Research*, Greenwald & Leavitt in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, and Laurent and Kapferer in the *Journal of Marketing Research*. I suggest that none of these sources would normally come to the attention of exhibit

designers, yet the topic of involvement is clearly vital to exhibit design. And so is the topic of affect, because it is the central concept in involvement.

Affect

Affect is a word more common to psychologists than to others, but since the early 1980s, the consumer literature has seen a flood of papers addressing the question of the role of affect in advertising effectiveness. The area has become a continuing topic in consumer research. I regret I do not have time to do it justice here, but let me urge you to follow up on it, because I believe it is the key to effective exhibit design.

Affect is in general our feeling toward something. In our evolutionary development, the most important quality for us of any stimulus has always been whether to approach or avoid it—that is, whether it will reward us or harm us. Our feeling toward an object is largely our record of this information, with the intensity of the feeling being recorded as its importance to us. Thus affect quality and intensity make up the essential ingredients of involvement.

When our attention is aroused by any one of a number of factors, such as novelty, or the unexpected, the result is a narrowing of focus and a direction of attention toward the stimulus. We seem to sense first the important approach/avoid information, and we tag each stimulus when we meet it with an affective tag for future encounters: either “approachable, good,” or “must avoid, bad.” These tags constitute our affective assessment, and they are separate from whatever meaning the stimulus has. In any encounter we have both cognition and affect.

At risk of oversimplifying here, we can summarize the cognitive aspect as the factual, informational part of an ad or exhibit, while the affective aspect is the feeling of liking-disliking, or perhaps an even stronger emotional response to it. As an illustration, Park and Mittal (1985) use an AT&T commercial. Cognitive involvement would include attending to information on call costs, dependability, and sound quality. Affective involvement, on the other hand, is triggered in the commercial by the image of an emotionally-moved mother who says as she puts down the phone, “He said, ‘I called you, Mom, because I love you’.” The affective element tends to dominate our response here and in most ads, possibly because approach-avoid has been evolutionally so much more important than cognition.

The idea that knowing and feeling are likely totally separate systems began to arise about 1980 with the work of Zajonc. Without going into detail on what is still a controversial point, what we have found is that the affective component is very fast—so fast that we can feel about something even before we can see what it is (Zajonc & Marcus, 1982). In fact, the human experience is seldom without affect or emotion. Nearly all memories have affective tags which exist separate from the meaning, or cognitive part, of the memory. Information about people is a good

example: we know about them, but we also feel toward them. While cognitions are generally transmitted verbally, affect will generally be picked up in nonverbal ways. Knowing this, advertisers work hard to insinuate affect into their ads, often through the scene in the background, or the associations objects arouse, in order to increase our involvement.

The use of affect in advertising has steadily risen throughout the twentieth century. At the turn of the century, advertising was for the most part informational. That is, it was directed at communicating to its audience facts about the product—what its features were, how well it was made, why it was better than the competition's, and so forth. Pictures began to accompany the text, and as printing technology advanced, the move toward the use of affect began to increase with ads eventually appearing in color. At first, affect was used mostly to attract and hold attention, but later it became clear that the point of advertising was often simply to make people feel good about the product, and the information component diminished and now is often totally absent. The idea here is, if you can make consumers feel good about the product, then later in the store they will select it over the competition. Thus, from the mid-1960s on, the study of affect became an important focus in research on ad effectiveness.

This, of course, has relevance to museum marketers: they want people to feel good about the museum, but my point here is another one. Affect within museums has increased over the years, much as it has in advertising. Early museums were largely cognitive experiences with artifacts placed in cases with signs to give them meaning. Affect was in evidence by the 1940s. The push-buttons that I fondly remember from my youth in Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry clearly increased my involvement on the affective side. Today some even argue we are in danger of following advertising by going too far toward affect and operating pure entertainment halls. The research in the consumer behavior field, however, would suggest that both cognition and affect must coexist, and that both are necessary for maximal effectiveness and involvement.

It is interesting that this theme has appeared recently in the visitor studies field as well. Only two years ago at this conference in Ottawa, Lisa Roberts of the Chicago Botanic Gardens presented a paper entitled, "Affective Learning, Affective Experience: What does It Have To Do With Museum Education?" Consistent with the consumer behavior research, she concluded that information and affect are both legitimate components in the learning context, that affect is crucial in providing motivation and in "shaping people's values and beliefs," and that affect is clearly relevant to the museum experience (Roberts, 1991).

She could have supported her conclusion with a number of studies from the consumer field. For example, her point echoes that of Celsi and Olson (1988), writing in the *Journal of Consumer Research*. They use the term "felt involvement" to refer to what is essentially the affective side of involvement. Summarizing the research, they clearly spell out its impact.

They write that the consumers' felt involvement is a motivational state that influences:

- 1) the amount and direction of their attention;
- 2) the cognitive and physical effort they expend during comprehension;
- 3) the focus of their attention and comprehension processes; and
- 4) the depth and breadth of semantic elaboration during comprehension. (Celsi & Olson, 1988, p. 223)

In other words, they find that the affective dimension is crucial to cognitive comprehension. The extensive consumer research on which Celsi and Olson are basing their conclusion would certainly appear to be relevant to exhibit designers, and may well help us avoid rediscovering what is already known. The research shows that affect and cognition interact in a number of ways. We take a brief look at some of these next.

Affect-Cognitive Interactions

Affect directs cognition. Cognitions with strong affect will tend to get priority, absorb our attention, and dominate our thinking (Klinger, Barta, & Maxeiner, 1980). In other words, the affective level often, if not usually, dominates and selects cognitions. Moreover, the stronger that affective/emotional cues are, the quicker their associated stimuli will get our attention. Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann (1983) have found that increased affect leads to more cognitive effort. Thus, affect has been shown to increase both attention getting and holding power, because it increases involvement.

Parallel research in the museum field has found a specific example of the same thing. Consider a study done by Bitgood, Patterson, and Benefield (1986) in which they found that dangerous species in a zoo attract attention more strongly than nondangerous ones. Danger is, of course, highly affective, so it is not surprising that the more dangerous animals are perceived to be, the more strongly they attract our attention. However, these authors also found that while attracting power increases, holding power does not—a good indication that these two indexes are not the same thing. Analysis based on the consumer research may be useful here to account for why holding power does not increase.

Consumer research shows that attention involves at least four levels (Greenwald & Leavitt, 1984), and dangerous stimuli probably work on the lowest level, which has strong attention-getting properties of high affect, but low cognition. The meaning of the danger, on the other hand, involves a higher attention level requiring more cognitive comprehension and takes more time than simply noticing. In the case of dangerous animals, when comprehension does take place, the realization arises that the dangerous stimulus is in a cage and is not actually harmful. At this point, the personal relevance is reduced, focal attention drops, and the viewer turns

away. In other words, the personally relevant factor, so important to holding power, in this case is reduced once the higher processing occurs. (It is hard to know how it could be sustained here.) Such an interpretation would, of course, be consistent with a conclusion that personal relevance is the key concept. Incidentally, the consumer research in the area of attention is extensive.

Affect may compete with cognition. Since affect directs cognition, it follows that the more affect that distractors have, the more they will disrupt cognitions. Several studies have confirmed this (e.g., Izard, Nagler, Randall, & Fox, 1965). It is only when the affect is part of the message, that increases in affect tend to increase learning.

Thus the use of attention-getters does get attention, but may not always be better at getting the message across. Reeves (1961), writing about his experiences in advertising, reports that when a beautiful woman vocalized a message in several commercials, no one heard the message because the woman was so distracting. Another advertising executive, Ogilvy (1985), says he stopped using celebrity endorsements in his ads because "readers remember the celebrity and forget the product."

At Suffolk University we found that a woman in an ad attracted attention and was remembered, but if she had no relationship to the brand name, the brand was not retained any better (Warah, 1986). The attention-getter needs to be related to the message in order for increased retention to take place.

Incidentally, this study also underscored the need for careful measurement of exhibit effectiveness. If we simply ask whether people remember having seen a certain exhibit, they may pass the test, but if we ask what the point of the exhibit was, they may flunk.

Affect may prevent cognition. An interesting recent study illustrates an additional element in cognitive-affective competition. In this study the distractor is not actually present at the same time as the message, yet it seems to have shifted the subjects out of the cognitive mode into an affective one. Two groups of subjects were asked to watch a perfume ad. One group sampled the perfume beforehand, while the other group did not. The researchers reported, "Those subjects who sampled the perfume were more influenced by the model's attractiveness than by argument strength. Subjects not exposed to the perfume were more influenced by argument strength than by the model's attractiveness" (DeBono, Kerin, Shaker, & Shapiro, 1992). In other words, sampling the perfume shifted the subjects' attention from cognition to affect.

Thus, strongly affective distractors not only distract from the intended message, but they may actually shift the viewer from a cognitive mode into an affective one, in which he/she no longer looks for cognitive information. If your exhibit is largely cognitive, this could be a disastrous event. Such an attention-getter might be counterproductive.

This may have been what was happening on one occasion a number of years ago when I was observing visitors in the Railroad Hall of the Smithsonian Museum of American History. In the course of three hours I observed every person who entered the hall. It was not particularly busy, so not many were there at any one time. Visitors entered a long wide hall by coming down a few steps at one end and exited at the other end. The room was full of display cases showing models and other transportation exhibits. The whole left wall in the visitor's passage was glass, about 15 feet high, and in front of it was a full-size steam locomotive. Buried somewhere inside this huge display was a loudspeaker which was issuing sounds of a steam train getting underway with the conductor shouting, "Board!" Visitors appeared excited and energized by the totality of the size and sound.

People came in the door, heard the sound, and made a rapid movement to the source of the sound. Once there, they tended to exclaim, "Oh, Wow!" and exchange bits of conversation alternating, "I wonder if..." with various replies made up of fragments of misinformation. There was a huge sign standing right beside them that would have answered nearly all their questions, but few read it. In fact, few seemed to notice it, but the striking thing of the whole three hours was that in all that time not one person even glanced at any other exhibit in the room. Neither on their way in, nor when they had finished absorbing the locomotive and made a beeline out the door at the far end, did they even glance to the left or right. Their eyes were always straight ahead, and the exhibits might just as well not have been there. I was unable to detect a single glance to the side in three hours.

I suspect the problem is a particularly common one at the Smithsonian, because people are in a tremendous rush to see all the museums in a few hours. What they are looking for are the big dramatic pieces, and they dash through the halls looking for them, so that they don't miss any. Had there been no dramatic piece, they still might not have looked at the smaller exhibits. Still, it would appear to be a good example of affect having replaced cognition. It certainly suggests that affect and cognition won't automatically coexist, and that some care must be given to locating the big affective display.

Increasing Exhibit Involvement

Five Dimensions of Involvement

The process of increasing affect and personal relevance has been developed to a high level in advertising. Study of ads will reveal at least five ways this is being done. A brief review may be helpful.

Identification

Illuminating a potentially important component of involvement, David Ogilvy, one of the most successful of advertising executives, says, "When I worked for Dr. Gallup, I noticed that moviegoers were more interested in

worked for Dr. Gallup, I noticed that moviegoers were more interested in actors of their own sex. People want to see movie stars with whom they can identify. The same force is at work in advertisements" (Ogilvy, 1985, p. 79). Most magazines in the supermarket have a picture of a woman's face on the cover for this reason. Women identify with women, and Nelson (1986) reports that children are more likely to learn when the model is a child than when it is an adult. Part of the Ninja Turtles' appeal to adolescents is that they, too, are adolescents. Sometimes we identify not with what we are, but with what we want to be. This is particularly likely to happen in adolescence when the formation of identity is the central psychological focus. A clear example is the Marlboro Man, one of the most effective ad series of all time (Ogilvy, 1985), which gets its power from its ability to offer an independent, rugged, masculine identity to adolescent males striving to be adult. It is also adolescents who make Terminator-type movies successful.

While we have a different situation in museums, the point is indisputable that there is power in casting exhibits in a light that allows the viewer to identify with the material. For example, Worts (1991), using the term to mean "personal relevance," has confirmed that identification is vital if visitors are to find meaning in the art museum. Schroeder (1993) reported that favorite vistas in an arboretum were those which visitors associated with "memories of people, places, and past events in their lives." In other words, they chose places with which they could identify.

Human interest has long been recognized as the essential ingredient in news stories. It is also guaranteed to add involvement in exhibits. It works because of the process of identification. If I can identify with the people, then I can feel as they do. Adding feeling is, of course, adding affect.

Enhanced self-worth

Identification is one of a number of needs that come under the heading of ego needs. They are mostly based on the need to feel some importance or worth in life, so a more general rule is that anything which works in the direction of an increased sense of personal importance should be more involving. Exhibits may do this, but we should not overlook the background where affect is being picked up nonverbally, that is, the museum experience as a whole. For example, cordiality and graciousness on the part of the staff make a visitor feel more important, and would be predicted to cause them to spend more time on the exhibits and probably regard the whole museum building more favorably. It is likely that a clean and well-maintained building and grounds would have a similar effect. Conversely, details which make a visitor feel neglected or ignored will tend to lower mood, if not build resentment, and are guaranteed to detract from exhibit attention and retention.

Cultural appeals

Study of ads will also reveal a variety of appeals based on culture, reflecting values that the main culture regards highly. A number of lists of such values have appeared in the consumer literature. For example, Schiffman and Kanuk (1991) list eleven American core values that have particular relevance to the consumer field: achievement & success, activity, efficiency & practicality, progress, material comfort, individualism, freedom, external conformity, humanitarianism, youthfulness, fitness & health.

All these themes have been used in advertising to increase involvement. For just one example, "freedom," one of these core values, appears in the General Motors magazine ad which shows a car on the open road, and says, "It's not just a car, it's your freedom." The use of this theme strikes a chord in the typical American viewer that gets them involved in the message. In this and other similar lists we have qualities that tend to increase the viewer's personal involvement. It is clearly a challenge to work these themes into exhibits as advertisers are doing, but the prediction would be that by doing so we would nearly always increase viewer involvement.

Transient need states

Appeals in the category of transient need states are not as permanent and enduring as those we have discussed so far. Some needs come and go. McGuire (1976) says, "People are more likely to notice aspects of their environment that are relevant to the satisfaction of their current needs." This heightened awareness of certain stimuli is called perceptual vigilance. For example, if you are hungry, you notice food ads. Perceptual vigilance is used by marketers, because, by calling attention to a need, they momentarily increase that need, and can then expect increased attention to a product that offers to satisfy that need. Many ads work this way, by appealing to both physical and psychological needs.

How can we apply this principle to the consumers of the museum experience? What we would need to do is increase the need that viewers have for the information which is available in the exhibit. The question we should ask ourselves during the design process is, "Why should visitors be interested?" If we cannot think of a reason they should know this information, then we should not be surprised if they, in fact, pass it by. One form of need arousal has appeared in the device of leading questions sometimes used in exhibits, such as the flip format discussed by Screven (1986). One possible reason such questions work is that they create a need for the answer, for which visitors will then spend a bit more time searching. In other words, we have increased their involvement by increasing their need. Interactives are also utilizing this idea. When interacting, we have to pay attention. That is, we have an increased need for information to direct our motor activity.

The pull of transient need states also applies to distractors. Being aware of these and eliminating them can increase viewers' involvement in the exhibit. For example, articles have appeared over the years urging museum staff to provide places to sit, things to lean against, convenient rest rooms, and sources of food, to name just a few. When you are hungry, food stimuli attract attention. If they are part of your exhibit that may be good, but if they are next door in the cafeteria, your exhibit will suffer. In general, increasing the comfort of the visitor will free their psychic energy to attend to the exhibits.

Special interests

Special interests are one final category of appeals that increase involvement. At times we all value special things. For instance, there are clubs for people with similar interests, like boating, golf or fitness. There seems to be a magazine for every special interest known. McGuire (1976) notes how special interests change our perception. He says, "People tend to notice aspects of the environment that are relevant to those aspects of the world they value highly." For example, automobile buffs will tend to notice more quickly an automobile-related stimulus, while gardeners may notice the flowers around it. We notice those things we are interested in more quickly, and we stay with them longer.

This concept could perhaps be applied by promoting small exhibits around special themes targeted at special groups. That is, instead of trying to reach everyone with every exhibit, maybe some exhibit space could be devoted to special groups in succession. Once there, of course, one looks around. Getting people in the doors this way is very like giving samples in promotional schemes. Once people have been there, and have had an enjoyable experience, the museum will be no longer a strange and distant place. The device will likely increase viewership of the other exhibits, as well as increase the likelihood of return visits.

I have not by any means exhausted either the consumer studies on involvement, nor those on affect. Nor have I touched on any of the dozens of other research topics of relevance. There is a huge body of literature of interest and relevance, but published in the consumer behavior field, and thus unknown to museum exhibit designers. Research might be better directed in many cases at proving in the museum context the application or nonapplication of principles already established, rather than beginning from scratch. I hope I have been able to whet your appetite for some more of the consumer behavior literature. I hope to have more synopses to present to you in the future.

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