The Question of Visitor Styles

Beverly Serrell
Serrell & Associates
Chicago, Illinois

A current trend in evaluation is to group exhibit visitors into catchy categories based on the observer's assumptions about their motivations and time-use patterns. "Streakers," "studiers," "browsers," "grazers" and "discoverers" are just a few sobriquets that have been used to describe different visitor styles of using exhibits. Inherent in those names are certain value judgements and assumptions that can work for, or, too often, against making exhibit information more accessible to visitors.

I used to believe in visitor styles. I even published an article called "Stuffed Birds on Sticks" (Serrell, 1990) based on work done in the bird halls at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, that contained descriptions of three different types. But I've changed my thinking. This paper will review the case study that helped me move beyond styles, a reflection on a number of problems with the concept, and some suggestions for how to look at visitor time budgeting in a more useful, less value-laden way.

A Case Study

At the Field Museum we had conducted preliminary observations of visitor behavior in the bird halls and jumped to the conclusion that there were three styles of visiting: the transient, the sampler, and the methodical approach. When we had actually finished the studies that compared the old bird exhibits to the newly renovated hall, we looked at the data in several different ways, still clinging to the notion that there were three styles, but, instead, came up with the idea that *everyone* was a sampler. Some people sampled a little bit, some sampled more, and some sampled a lot—in a continuum, not three separate populations. Regardless of how much time they spent, however, most of them seemed to be interested and enjoying themselves. It seemed much too subjective and unfair to assume that a person who spent 3 minutes wasn't getting anything and a person who spent 15 minutes was. We dropped the "transients" from the data because people who just walked through the hall as a passageway did not fit into our definition of being actual users of the exhibits. Likewise, no one fit our preconception of a methodical visitor who spends a lot of time looking at most of the exhibit elements closely (See Note 1).

After doing three years of tracking and timing studies at the Field Museum, looking at a lot of data on visitors moving through entire exhibits (See Note 2), and interviewing visitors afterwards to find out what kinds of cognitive and affective impacts had taken place, we abandoned the notion of styles. Pigeon-holing and typing visitors into fixed categories has not proven to be a useful construct in summative evaluation. Instead, we've focused more on the overall pictures that are formed by visitors as they move through exhibit and the broad trends and patterns that emerge from this kind of data.

The pattern that we saw was a tendency, in a 5,000-square-foot hall, for the average time to be only around 10 minutes. Instead of thinking of it as "the average visitor spent 10 minutes," which is not what happened, we could very accurately describe the data as "50% of the visitors did not spend more than 10 minutes," or "80% of the sample spent less than 13 minutes." Combining time and the square feet of the hall to arrive at a figure of square-feet-per-minute (which allows comparisons between different-size exhibits) we had another abstract, but useful, figure of 500 square feet per minute. Five hundred square feet per minute is not enough time to stop very often, or to stop for very long, which suggests that people were either reading at a mile a minute or, more probably, they were not reading very much.

Another pattern that emerged was that out of all the elements available in the hall (an element can be a huge diorama, an individual console for a video, a small, simple interactive, or a series of single-topic graphic panels, etc.), few visitors looked at more than half of them. The tendency was for the average "use" to be roughly 30% of the exhibit. In all of our tracking time data, we have never seen more than 60% of the exhibit used, on average.

After looking at the bird halls, along with "Nature Walk," and "Mammals of the World," and seeing similar kinds of patterns for all three circumstances, the exhibit developers sat down and said, "What does this really mean, how can we use it, and what might we do differently?" They looked closely at the data,and began to figure out what they could do to create a realistic, interesting, engaging experience in 10 minutes in a 5,000-square-foot hall, given the fact that most visitors don't utilize the majority of the elements. They asked, How can we communicate our intended messages to visitors if they only use 30% of the exhibit? The implications were that there would have to be a lot of complementary information and a certain amount of redundancy built into the exhibit. People might skip the first three panels, or go around to avoid a crowded place, or stop and look only at the last three elements because that's what they're interested in. Under these circumstances, there still should be some notion in the visitor's mind of what it was the exhibit developers were trying to get across in this hall.

Changes were made in the planning and design of *Messages from the Wilderness*, the fourth in a series of animal halls that were being re-done at

the Field Museum. Exhibit developers narrowed down the number of concepts they were attempting to communicate, clarified them, and added more complementary information. Fewer elements were planned and each was designed for visitors to use quickly and easily. Label copy was kept short and in chunks; videos were under 4 minutes. Different formats for telling similar stories, or different modalities of presenting information were used. A visitor might turn a wheel that tells a sequential story, see a static graphic panel with a little narrative and some illustrations, look at the diorama, or listen to an audio tape.

The consequence of exhibit developers thinking about one, time-limited, nonsequential, motivated but nonexpert audience (where everyone's style is assumed to be "sampler") was an exhibit that appears to be very gratifying—for both visitors and designers. In fact, visitors did slow down, spend more time, and stop and look and read, instead of shooting through the hall in a straight line, glancing from side to side, only occasionally stopping. In *Messages*, the majority of visitors actually zigzagged back and forth across the hall. Also, the average percentage of the hall that was used rose to 48%, as opposed to the more usual 20% and 30%, and there is ample evidence that visitors can get the main idea (See Note 3).

The Problems With Styles

I see a lot of problems with using the notion of style. While it may seem to make simple, intuitive sense, upon closer examination, the idea of style has many faults:

• There are problems with the budget. Assuming that the different styles occur in your audience at different rates, are you devoting 25% of your budget to satisfy 2% of your audience?

• There are problems with visitors not recognizing the levels or styles that you intend to create in the exhibit. Color, type size, and icons tend to be too subtle, and therefore, invisible to most visitors. A long label about a popular topic intended for "studiers" may be frustrating to visitors who are attracted to the subject but turned off by the length. Introductory or general messages that are meant for "browsers" are often not associated with objects of interest, and thus are ignored by most people. Labels written for children are read by many adults; exhibit computer programs designed to provide more in-depth information for adults are used by 12-year-olds.

• There are problems with formative testing. If you have an exhibit element that is meant for the "discoverer," or a unit that is meant for the "studier" style, how do you go out on the floor and find that population to test it with? How long would it take to find 10 visitors who identify themselves as one of those categories that you think exist? What about categorizing children?

• There are problems with trying to match styles and subject matter, especially when dealing with naive notions. Naive notions cut across age

groups, schooling, gender, and social groupings. If you have an exhibit that is trying to communicate some corrections of a naive notion, you can't segment it by style. Naive notions need to be addressed everywhere in the exhibit.

• There are problems with the amount of information. There have been instances of supposed "studiers" saying they want *more* information. But what they might be asking for is the *right kind* of information. Walking through the exhibit, they're looking for something that's interesting and meaningful to them, and what they get is panel after panel of text, complicated interactives, and long videos. When they don't find the right information easily, they come out saying they wanted more.

• There are problems with the tyranny of typecasting. Can a person enter the exhibit as a browser and leave as a studier? What if a person enters thinking they will be very interested in the exhibit, but ends up breezing through? (See Note 4.)

• There are problems with oversimplifying and ignoring the underlying issues: Do exhibits make visitors "grazers" because that's the only way people can cope with the overwhelming complexity of the intimidating environment?

• There are problems with achieving the objectives of the exhibit when you think about style. This is one of the things that we found very strongly when we looked at the learning outcomes and affective outcomes of the three halls that we evaluated before going on to design *Messages*. Information that was considered "fun" and put in primarily to be entertaining (e.g., interesting trivia and fun facts) for the nonserious visitors became distracting from the more important, basic messages that were the intended communication goals in the hall. Not just for a small percentage of the audience, the fun facts turned out to be fun for lots of people, and the time spent attending to them was time not spent elsewhere. When the exhibit developers for *Messages* decided not to use fun facts, and, instead, converted the major messages into exhibit elements that were attractive, fun to use, appropriate, interesting, and tied into visitors' prior knowledge and expectations, they were much more successful in achieving the stated communication goals. And this was all without negatively affecting the visitors' enjoyment of the hall.

Beyond Styles

I think we should stop putting value judgments on what some visitors do. I think we should look more carefully at what general patterns and trends are evident, and work within those to communicate the messages and information that we want to convey. Let's use media that most logically communicate those stories, and let's look for multiple ways of telling those stories. It's not the difference in how you develop one particular element of the exhibit, but more how you go about thinking about the whole process of development from the beginning, that will direct your goal toward planning a visitor experience that is realistically and successfully balanced with their expectations and behaviors.

The biggest problem in making assumptions about visitors' prior knowledge, interest, gender bias, social group influences, and all the other variables that can be infinitely recombined to contribute to the style-of-the-moment is that it distracts us from what should be our real concern: Does this exhibit make sense, and is it likely to be meaningful for any self-selecting visitor who stops at it?

The notion of style is a more useful exercise as something that you go through yourself, in your mind, trying to clarify different visitor needs and thinking about different ways you might satisfy them. But in the end, it should be the exhibit that gets evaluated. The question, "What is the exhibit's ability to communicate?," should be the driving force in the actual design process.

Pigeon-holing visitors into styles is a way to deal with a lack of real knowledge about them. Rather than making assumptions about visitors' motivations and giving them value-laden names, think about each *exhibit element* as a unit of potential time (e.g., it takes 5 seconds to look at this; it takes 15 seconds to read that; this video lasts 3 minutes; or, it will take people about 10 seconds to figure this out). Then, plan the exhibit so an appropriate number of elements can be used and experienced in the amount of time that visitors are likely to spend. Time-use categories are more valid, value-free, clear, and objective for planning and evaluating exhibits than are the negative, elitist, or bovine images created by most "styles." Time-use is based on real data, not assumptions.

Styles as applied to exhibit elements, commonly called modalities, lead to a sense of inclusiveness for the exhibit as a whole, whereas styles applied to visitors often become limiting and exclusive, e.g., "this is for studiers—people who want to know more about the topic." That thinking tends to encourage the design of exhibit elements that are appealing to only a very small fraction of the audience. Using the concept of different exhibit element modalities, and the time it takes to use them, is a more useful frame of reference.

Notes

(1) The visitor who spent the most time in the hall and looked at the greatest percentage of the exhibit was a woman with two other adult women (who looked like bird watchers), who spent much of her time talking socially and looking at her companions.

(2) We are in the process of a cooperative study, collecting data from more than 20 people at a variety of institutions, to compare visitor time budgeting, and to look for some common patterns. This study will be reported at a Visitor Studies Association conference in the future.

(3) A summary of the front-end, formative, and summative evaluation studies done before and after opening *Messages from the Wilderness* is available from the author or the Field Museum.

(4) During the discussion period, evaluator Minda Borun of the Franklin Institute (Philadelphia) made the following comment:

There might be a self-fulfilling prophecy in starting out with the notion about visitor types. One is that we used to think visitors didn't read labels, because early studies showed that visitors weren't reading labels in museums. Then Judy Rand came along and wrote some really good labels, and visitors started reading them, so we learned that it wasn't an effect of innate visitor characteristics, but just how we do exhibits. Visitors weren't reading *bad* labels, and changing the way we do exhibits can change visitor behavior. I guess I want to underline what Beverly is saying: That if you assume you're going to make a really good exhibit that appeals to 50% to 80% of the visitors and attempt to do that, the outcome is likely to be better.

Reference

Serrell, B. (1990).   Stuffed birds on sticks: Plans to re-do the bird hall at Field Museum. In S. Bitgood, A. Benefield, & D. Patterson, (Eds.) *Visitor Studies: Theory, Research, and Practice, Volume 3. Proceedings of the 1990 Visitor Studies Conference* (pp. 263-269). Jacksonville, AL: Center for Social Design.