Chapter 7

GRAPHICS BEFORE EVALUATION? EVEN WITH THE CART BEFORE THE HORSE, IT'S POSSIBLE TO FINISH THE RACE

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Let me tell you a couple of almost-true stories. The director of a brand-new zoo, whose tight budget is already over-spent with unexpected costs, realizes no one has thought of graphics for the new Giraffe Barn. The exhibit opens in two months. So he makes a call to a graphics designer. "We need signs! Fast!" he pleads. And because he wants these signs to be permanent he will "find" the money to produce them.

There's not much time to conceptualize, write, design, fabricate, frame and install the large interpretive panels and identification labels needed. Where is the time for the front-end evaluation meetings, the formative evaluation stage of testing prototypes? All the evaluation that will be left is the summative stage, with the hopes that there aren't too many "Oh, Ohs!" discovered when its too late, and too expensive, to change them.

So the designer calls in all his associates and, by using their own past experience (where the horse preceded the cart), as well as publications from conferences such as this one (where data about *Naive Notions and the Design of Exhibits, Recent Audience Research*, and *The Relationship Between Interest, Attention and Learning* have been reported), by working late into the night, night after night, by reusing as many existing illustrations as possible, and by calling in all old favors from the fabricators and framers, graphic panels are actually ready for the Giraffe Barn Opening! The director, after recovering from the shock at how much it costs to produce "just a few signs", is pleased because the graphics look good. The public has no idea that they might have had to guess what the animals are, where they live in the wild, or how this zoo is working to preserve the species. The designer is relieved that the deadline was met.

But the design team knows that the graphics could have been a whole lot better if there had been more time to develop them carefully.

That was a worst-case scenario. The following is a not-so-bad-case scenario. More often, some zoo director strolls through his 60-year-old zoo, and realizes that the plastic engraved signs, though they have lasted for years, don't look as nice as the signs and labels he saw at the last zoo conference. So he calls for "new signs". The Curators, Education Coordinator and her illustration volunteer don't have time to redo all the identification labels and information signs in the park. They don't have time to read the new literature about which signs have been tested and found to be the most memorable by the general public. They are not design specialists, knowing how to balance titles, blocks of text, illustrations, range maps, vanishing animal symbols and "blank space" into a visually pleasing graphic design which will look good anywhere in the park. So, reluctantly, the director calls in outside help.

Notice that the director has not said, "I want someone to come in here, take a long look at our visitor traffic patterns, interview myself, our curators, keepers and education department to determine which concepts we want our visitors to understand, find out what the visitors want to know, test our findings with temporary signs, change whatever text and illustrations need to be changed to reach our goals, then produce the finished labels and signs in the best materials we can afford, and see to it they are framed and installed correctly so we don't have to replace them in a year or two."

He hasn't said that. He's said, "We need some new signs." He doesn't realize that he's asked for the cart to lead the horse. So, assuming the designer's team is the jockey, how can they finish this "race", pushing the cart along? How can the design team reach the goal of installing graphics that the visitors are attracted to, will enjoy reading, and will remember?

How? In a word...strategy. To begin with, the designer doesn't use phrases like "front-end evaluation." That sounds too much like some high level test where the score reflects what's wrong with the zoo's hopefully-educational signs. Strategically, the designer begins calling meetings, just getting-to-know-you gatherings where the curators, keepers and other involved staff members can talk about what they think the graphics should be. After a meeting or two, after it has become obvious that a little research would help get everyone focused on how to graphically achieve their educational goals, another professional associate is introduced to the staff. Enter the Evaluation Professional.

The designer may "forget" to mention that his evaluation consultant has a Ph.D. because, like many people without graduate degrees, the director is probably a little intimidated by such things. Besides, "Who needs a Ph.D.?" The director has had more experience with animals than that recently-graduated "Doctor" will ever have time to accumulate.

Of course there may be some back-tracking needed. But it is not too late to rethink some of the pet concepts of the curator who is convinced that it's okay to create signs like pages out of some hoofed stock newsletter . . . or that other curator who is equally convinced that "people don't read signs so don't bother writing anything."

As the planned process evolves, the concepts and writing begin to take shape. Preliminary designs and illustrations are roughed out. Paper signs are put in place on busy Saturdays to test which visitors read what signs, for how long. Then improved prototypes are created and tested. Finally the signs have been "perfected" and the staff has become excited by the unfolding adventure to which each person has contributed. Getting "new signs" has involved an inter-relationship the staff probably hasn't enjoyed before. Keepers, curators and even the director are happily surprised by a new level of respect and understanding they share.

The result is that the director, unaware of the pre-planned sequence that did, in fact, incorporate studies of visitor traffic patterns, interviews, and testing of text and type, gets his "new signs". The final graphics look like they floated into place without the struggles inherent in creating them.

Maybe the budget won't allow the whole park to be done at once, but as each area's graphics are developed, with old black and white plastic signs being replaced by more colorful, more readable graphics, everyone is proud of the "face lift" to the park's educational system.

The Education Coordinator is particularly happy. In the process of developing the identification labels and informational signs, concepts for her school programs, on-site workshops, and the Conservation Day activities have been introduced. Her educational materials can continue to build on these concepts, embellishing them with details too numerous to put on any sign.

All that's left is the summative evaluation process. With the strategy followed up to this point, there won't be too many "Oh, Ohs" discovered, not too many elements to change before creating the next area's graphics.

The cart was before the horse in this race. But probably, having experienced the non-threatening process of using a graphic design team which includes an evaluator, the director will allow the horse to lead the cart–next time.

Part 2

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO VISITOR STUDIES

Visitor studies is a multi-disciplined, eclectic field and therefore it borrows its theories and methods from many areas. The three chapters in this section represent only three of the many possible areas that do or could contribute to visitor studies. Aveni's paper ("What Sociology Has to Offer Visitor Studies") suggests how sociological theory might contribute to visitor studies. Koran, Koran and Foster in their paper entitled, "The (Potential) Contributions of Cognitive Psychology to Visitor Studies" describe some of the possible ways the cognitive psychology literature could be applied to visitor studies; and, Patterson's "The Contribution of Environmental Psychology to Visitor Studies" illustrates what environmental psychology might offer visitor studies. Other areas might have also been included, for example, instructional technology, marketing, leisure studies, human factors, public relations, etc. Perhaps some of these areas can be discussed at future meetings.