Watch Your Language!
People Do Read Labels

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Visitors can be reading exhibit labels even when it looks as if they are not, and the way labels are written should be driven by the way visitors are likely to read.

Reading behavior is extremely difficult human behavior to observe. The average literate person has the ability to process print at the rate of 250-300 words per minute, and this means that the museum visitor can read 20 words or more in five seconds as he or she walks toward an exhibit. Visitors can also read texts placed near the operating parts of interactive exhibits without an observer being aware they are looking at labels. It is not surprising, then, that visitors in museums are likely to be recorded in observational studies as nonreaders. Such recording is particularly likely to occur if the observer is looking for dedicated reading, e.g., full attention, eyes fixed on text. "Not seen to read" does not necessarily mean that reading has not occurred.

Observational procedures characteristically focus on a single person as the unit of study. However, most people visit museums in a social group and individuals within social groups tend to take on the label-reading task for the whole group (McManus, 1987a; Hirshi and Screven, 1988). They read selective segments out loud or paraphrase sections of text for their companions (Taylor, 1986). The group as a unit is then "read" label texts, and taken information from them, but observation of any individual member of the group other than the reader will indicate that the label text has been ignored.

I came to these conclusions after examining data from a study in the Natural History Museum, London, that included recorded transcripts of 114 recorded visitor-group conversations and unobtrusively observed reading behavior of the same visitor groups (Lucas, McManus and Thomas, 1986; McManus, 1987a). The observational data indicated that 66 percent of visitor groups had had access to the information in labels. This is quite a high number. However, 84 of the transcripts of the same visitor groups' conversations either contained segments of verbatim reading from texts or carried paraphrases of the content of exhibit texts. Among these conversations were those of 22 groups who had been coded as "not seen to read," that is, nonobserved readers. When these groups are accounted for alongside those seen to glance at texts or to read comprehensively, we have evidence that 85 percent (n = 97) of visitor groups read label texts. That
is, more than eight out of ten visitor groups used the label texts when at exhibits.

The transcripts of group conversations were made in order to describe how ideas are communicated by the museum and between visitors in groups. Forty-one conversations were subjected to very detailed linguistic analysis (McManus, 1987a, b, 1989) which revealed that the relationship between visitors and museum people is mediated by label texts and is also very conversational in nature. All of the visitor groups talked on the topics set by the label writers and sections of transcripts indicated that visitors felt that "someone" was talking to them through exhibits. Consider the transcript segment:

Andrew. Look at this one here; this tells you that all the animals that eat things in the house

Also, visitors sometimes talked back to the "museum someone" who was communicating with them. In another transcript, the visitor reads aloud:

Are you a primate? Yes, you are a primate."

Then he answers out loud: "NO, I'M NOT."

The basis for a conversational relationship with the visitor rests on the interactive nature of written texts (McManus, 1989; Stubbs, 1983). For a general audience to become involved interactively with your labels, so that they form a close conversational relationship with you, the author, your labels need to aim at comprehension; that is, they need to convey a "what you need to know about the subject" approach and explicitly link successive points in your "story" to one another. The closer the conversational relationship between the label writer and the visitor, the more likely it is that communication between the two will be successful (McManus, 1989).

In the new-style exhibitions at The Natural History Museum in London, labels typically are written with imperative and interrogative statements and use "you" voice: "If you search a pond you will find many different living things. How would you sort these things out?" At the Monterey Bay Aquarium, a conversational, informal, humorous voice prevails: "See the rock with the ruffles? That's the horn-mouth, one of our more ornamental snails (Rand, 1985).

Having established a friendly conversational relationship with their audiences, exhibit label writers need to "keep up with their end of the conversation." This means accommodating what visitors require from label texts. What's this? What's going on? are the two most common questions.

It is unlikely that an entire label text will be attended to, no matter how long or short it is. There are two reasons for this. First, visitor groups are concerned with enjoying and maintaining social relationships with their companions (McManus, 1988). They will allow label writers to establish the topic of conversations, but they will not allow them to "hog" the language space. (Do you like people who talk all the time and will not allow you to put in a word edgewise?) Second, if visitors are reading your well-written labels fluently for comprehension, they will not need to attend to the entire label text anyway, because they will be scanning and sampling segments of it to confirm that the labels have the
meanings they have already predicted for them. The more visitors can be sure of the topic and context of the exhibit communication and the more familiar they are with the language used on labels, the less they need to “read.”

References


Resource people