Designing Interpretive Signs

Principles in Practice

Gianna Moscardo, Roy Ballantyne, and Karen Hughes

Sam H. Ham, Editor
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Contents

Foreword by Sam H. Ham . . . . . *ix*
Preface . . . . . *xi*

Chapter One
Setting the Scene: What Are Interpretive Signs and Exhibits? **1**
Signs—Here, There, and Everywhere! 1
Orientation and Information Signs 2
Warning and Safety Signs 2
Interpretive Signs 3
Interpretive Signs and Exhibits—Why Bother? 3
Laying the Foundations: Interpretive Building Blocks 3
Principle One: Interpretation Must Make a Personal Connection with, or Be Relevant to, the Intended Audience 5
Principle Two: Interpretation Should Provide or Encourage Novel and Varied Experiences 7
Principle Three: Interpretation Should Be Organized with Clear, Easy-to-follow Structures 8
Principle Four: Interpretation Should Be Based on a Theme 9
Principle Five: Interpretation Should Engage Visitors in the Learning Experience and Encourage Them to Take Control of Their Own Learning 10
Principle Six: Interpretation Should Demonstrate an Understanding of, and Respect for, the Audience 11
Key Points 12

Chapter Two
Look Before You Leap: Planning Interpretive Signs and Exhibits **13**
One Step at a Time: The Interpretive Planning Process 13
Defining Objectives 13
Turning Your Objectives into Themes 16
Themes and Subthemes 19
Choosing the Best Tool for the Job 19
Interpretive Signs and Exhibits: The Pros and Cons 21
Do Interpretive Signs and Exhibits Actually Work? 22
Key Points 25

Chapter Three
LOOK AT ME! Getting Visitors' Attention 27
Location, Location, Location! 27
How Low Can You Go? 32
Too Many Visitors Spoil the View 32
Let There Be Light! 32
HEY YOU—YES, YOU—READ ME! Methods of Attracting Attention 35
Catchy Titles and Other Tricks 35
Key Points 38

Chapter Four
"Stop, Look, and Listen": Keeping Visitors' Attention 39
Striking a Balance: Effort versus Reward 39
First Impressions Count 40
Font Size and Type 40
Spacing 41
Typeface 42
Using Capitals and Italics 43
Short and Sweet 43
Divide and Conquer 44
Variety Is the Spice of Life 47
Creating Visual Harmony 48
Color: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly 50
Action, Action, We Want Action! 52
Key Points 53

Chapter Five
Clear as Crystal: Writing Text That Visitors Understand 55
The Power of the Written Word 55
Getting the Message Across: Selecting Effective Text 60
Up Close and Personal 62
Making Important Connections 64
Key Points 66

Chapter Six
Lighting the Spark: Techniques to Foster Visitor Learning 69
The "Aha" Moment: Lifelong and Free Choice Learning 69
Bridging the Gap: Using Analogies and Metaphors 72
Connecting the Dots: Themes Again! 72
Each to Their Own: Layering Text 74
Picture This: Designing Meaningful Illustrations 77
Key Points 81

Chapter Seven
Meeting the Challenge: Creative Techniques for Special Purposes 83
"Hot Interpretation": Arousing Visitors' Emotions 83
Get Down and Dirty: Creating Immersion Experiences 86
Staying on Track: Designing Sets of Signs 87
Beauty Is in the Eye of the Beholder: Interpreting Art 89
All for One and One for All: Improving Access to Signs and Exhibits 91
Removing Physical Barriers 91
"Painting Pictures" Using Senses Other Than Sight 92
"Making Music" without Sound 94
Overcoming Learning Difficulties 95
Appealing to Mature Audiences 96
Key Points 97

Chapter Eight
Designing Family Exhibits and Signs: It's Child's Play—Or Is It? 99
Families That Play Together Stay Together: Social Interaction in Interpretive Settings 99
Gotcha! What Grabs Children's Attention? 102
Horses for Courses: Appealing to Different Age Groups 104
Preschoolers 107
Early Primary 108
Preadolescents 110
Adolescents 110
It's a Small World: Designing Child-friendly Signs 111
Children's Trails within Regular Exhibits 111
Key Points 113

Chapter Nine
Measure Twice, Cut Once: The Importance of Evaluation 115
Is Evaluation Really Necessary? 115
Getting the Ball Rolling: Front-end Evaluation 116
Practice Makes Perfect: Formative Evaluation 116
Tying Up Loose Ends: Summative Evaluation 118
Key Points 120

Chapter Ten
Wrapping It Up: The Interpretive Signs Checklist 121

References 125
Index 135

Foreword

Sign, sign, everywhere a sign
Blocking out the scenery, breaking my mind ...
—"Signs," Five Man Electrical Band, 1970

When the Canadian rock group Five Man Electrical Band wrote these lyrics, they unwittingly captured one of the most perplexing problems in the interpretation profession: the proliferation of signs. And there is some truth behind their objections. Ill-conceived, poorly designed, and inappropriately placed signs continue to clutter the landscape in some of the world's most special places. Moreover, signs are often the site manager's first choice among communication media because they're relatively inexpensive to produce and have the potential to communicate important information over a wide geographic area where paid staff simply can't be. So when a new interpretive need pops up, it's easy to erect "yet another" sign.

However, as valid as these concerns are, they point not so much to the number of signs in a given place as to the quality and communication effectiveness of the signs that are erected. Indeed, signs are essential in most interpretive settings, and studies show that they remain an appealing information source for visitors. Without signs, many interpretive programs simply could not achieve their missions. Recognizing this, Gianna Moscardo, Roy Ballantyne, and Karen Hughes have joined forces to author *Designing Interpretive Signs*, one of the most comprehensive and readable volumes ever produced on the use of signage in interpretation.

What appealed to me most in inviting this book into Fulcrum's Applied Communication Series was the combined experience of the three authors and their deep understanding of the interpretive signage literature. Virtually every conclusion they draw and the recommendations they offer about the design, content, placement, and evaluation of interpretive signs are based on the findings of current research. Much is known today about why some signs succeed when others fail, and the authors have masterfully assembled that body of knowledge in what I believe is an unprecedented attempt to give practicing interpreters the best available and most comprehensive advice on interpretive signage anywhere in the world.

Readers of these pages will find themselves immersed not only in the artwork of sign production, but in a delightful presentation of the strategy behind the art. Drawing on advances in cognitive science, Gianna, Roy, and Karen carefully walk their readers through the entire process of conceptualizing a sign based on its purpose and aims and proceeding through proven methods for attracting attention, provoking thought with strong themes and targeted content, considering issues related to sign location and placement, and gaining evaluative feedback both before a sign is produced and after it is installed. Most impressive about this volume is that it puts the audience at the center of the decision-making process in a way that few other books on this topic have done. In

communication, all things are audience-dependent, and the authors' thoughtful consideration of audiences' tastes, preferences, and tendencies underpins the advice offered in every chapter. In particular, chapter eight (Designing Family Exhibits and Signs) stands out as a long-overdue addition to the interpretation literature. Since most interpretive settings cater to the needs of family groups with children, the ideas presented in this chapter about reaching children with signs that are also intended for adults will stimulate many readers to think differently about interpretive signage in public areas.

Designing Interpretive Signs is destined to become one of those volumes that interpreters everywhere will want in their personal libraries. Rarely have I had the joy of editing such a meticulously prepared yet easy-to-read manuscript. Who knows? If the Five Man Electrical Band could have read these pages before they composed their hit song "Signs," they might have written different lyrics.

Sam H. Ham, Ph.D.
Professor and Director
Center for International Training
and Outreach
Department of Conservation Social Sciences
University of Idaho, U.S.A.

Deputy Director
Tourism Research Unit
Monash University, Australia

Preface

An important feature of interpretive signs and exhibits is that they are designed for multiple audiences. In the same way, this book has been designed to appeal to interpreters, both experienced and new; students of interpretation; and researchers seeking to explore and understand interpretation and its outcomes. Our overall goal is to provide people working and researching in this field with a summary of research evidence and current knowledge about how visitors respond to the many messages and media used in interpretive settings.

One of the challenges for those seeking to communicate about interpretation is to ensure that they practice what they preach. To this end, wherever possible we have incorporated features that match interpretive design principles, such as

- catchy titles and a little humor to "lighten the load";
- summaries of the key points for those who are in a hurry;
- chapters and sections that stand alone so readers can select the information that is of most relevance and interest to them and/or read the book in the order that best suits them; and
- examples and illustrations to make the principles and research "come to life."

We have used signs from many different types of visitor settings to illustrate our points. It is important for the reader to understand that there is no such thing as a "perfect" sign. In the words of one of the author's supervisors, "There is no such thing as a weakness there are only emerging strengths." All the signs in this book have both "actual strengths" and "emerging strengths," and we encourage the reader to focus on the "actual strengths" noted in the captions.

All new knowledge grows from existing knowledge, and all books rely heavily on the advice of colleagues and editors. The authors wish to acknowledge both the dedication of the researchers whose work is used in this book and the extensive efforts of the series editor, Professor Sam Ham. Sam's comments and suggestions have encouraged us to continue this endeavor and to improve our performance in too many ways to mention.