

Going beyond borders: The secrets behind our new animal identification labels

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Introduction

Zoos and aquariums use diverse resources in order to attract their visitors and facilitate their learning processes. Interpretative devices, such as animal identification labels, are a common example of these resources, but our educators have not reached a consensus on the ideal design, mostly because the effectiveness of these devices is rarely evaluated. Usually, most identification labels include basic information about the animal, such as: common name, scientific name, place of origin, conservation status, and a picture or illustration, however, designers are focused on their ideas of what is the most relevant information, frequently ignoring visitors' expectations. Have we asked them? Do our identification labels respond to relevant tendencies, such as social media?

Interpretative devices and their design challenge

Interpretative devices could be powerful tools to accomplish our educational goals, but sadly, visitor studies carried out in museums, zoos, and aquariums, even our own, have shown that few visitors actually read them (Fraser, Bicknell, Sickler & Taylor, 2009, Gerritsen, 2008). In order to design successful educational resources, identification labels included, we have to go beyond the borders of our traditional design process, which is mostly a result of what educators think is relevant to convey to visitors. The Barranquilla Zoo recently carried out a redesign process of its identification labels that involved different evaluation strategies. The output is a device which integrates criteria such as usability, readability, social media trends and, most important, simplicity (Sagolla, 2009, Maeda, 2006).

Methods

In order to develop a new design, we followed a four-step process that took us a little more than a year. First, we collected identification labels' images from 100 zoos and aquariums around the world, compared them, classified the information into categories, and determined their frequency of use. Second, we asked our visitors which type of information they preferred to find and in which format they wanted to see it. Third, through focal groups, online surveys



and readability tests, our visitors selected the most appealing information to them and the most effective ways to display it. Finally, we reviewed some of the most successful social media trends, standards for friendly interface and usability criteria, such as text length and updates.

Results

Regarding the most common information found in the identification labels that we reviewed, place of origin, common names and scientific names were the most popular (over 70%), followed by information about the distribution area (89%), amazing facts (61%), and type of food (38%). On the other hand, few identification labels had information about the individuals or groups found at the exhibit (6%) and just 8% had any kind of interactivity.

We also discovered that visitors want to find less technical and more anecdotal information. They expect to learn about the species, but they also want to know what is happening with the specific individual or group they see at the exhibit. Moreover, they want to choose which information appeals the most to them, and they want to be able to easily understand it. They also proposed alternative designs for our identification labels, that abandoned the traditional rectangle shaped formats and included interactive features.

Reviewing the most popular social media trends, we found three important characteristics which could be transferred to our identification



labels: First, Twitter limits the number of characters that people can type to communicate their messages, forcing them to write in a simple and direct way. Second, web pages have hypertext. Through links, people can navigate and access the content they want, so they choose to read more or less from a specific subject. Finally, web pages, Facebook,

and other social media can be easily updated and people always find something new when they access them.

The output: an Identification Labels 2.0 model

With this in mind and after many failed prototypes, we came to a round-shaped turning model. This design, similar to a roulette, has two circular layers that are put together, but only the lower layer can be turned, allowing our visitors to access just the amount of information they want, while the upper layer remains static. The upper layer has a free quadrant, as to divide the circle in four pieces, but we removed one of them in order to display the information on the lower layer.

Based on the evaluation process, which included both our visitors' expectations and our educational objectives, we decided that we would display the information in four categories. We also included in our design the most relevant social media trends, such as simplicity, text length (no more than 25 words), and frequently updating.

Our new identification labels include the following four information categories:

- **Lets discover:** We promote visitors' interactions with the exhibit, asking them to see, compare or act in a specific way, which can help them understand the information displayed or notice an important feature about the species. We also establish connections among different animals, and compare them to something that is familiar to visitors. For example, in the ostrich (*Struthiocamelus*) identification label we ask our visitors to count the number of fingers that this animal has and to compare it with the number of fingers other birds have at the zoo. When people count and compare, they learn that ostriches have only two fingers, while other birds usually have three.

- **What is happening?** This is the identification label updatable ingredient. Using markers, we include information about the specific individual or group at the exhibit, such as: Why the male lion is not at the exhibit?

- **Surprise:** This is where we share amazing facts about the species. Our intention is to show people that animals have features and adaptations, which make them special.

- **Place of origin:** It includes information about the species' distribution in the wild.

Discussion

Our new identification labels have gone beyond our borders because they break the pattern of intuitive design and were created based on visitors' expectations and relevant format trends, such as social media.

Our visitor studies show that our new identification labels are more attractive to visitors compared to the old ones. They increase the amount of time visitors interact with them. One of our weaknesses is the unawareness of some visitors noticing that the device could be turned in order to reveal more (or less) information. We are looking for alternatives to overcome this difficulty and this is why evaluation is very important. Nevertheless, our new identification labels have proved being likely to convey our educational messages in a better way, helping us to reach our mission.

References

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