Connecting With Our Audience

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Introduction

In recent times, zoological facilities have gone from consumers of wildlife to conservers of wildlife. Mission statements of most zoological facilities reflect the move away from a purely entertainment focus and now contain statements that demonstrate a commitment to conservation, education and research. With dwindling, polluted habitats and endangered species vanishing at alarming numbers, these commitments are sorely needed at this critical time.

As zoological facilities search for ways to pursue the objectives in their mission statements they evaluate the best ways to make the connections with their audience that promote visitation and encourage behavioral changes toward better stewardship of our environment and support of the facility's conservation projects.

Zoological facilities attract more than 700 million visitors around the world. Here in the US that number is over 175 million visitors each year. Those of us who present educational programs have a tremendous opportunity and responsibility to engage, inspire and empower our audience members. One of the most effective ways to do this is through educational programming.

Show - Much more than just a four-letter word

As a show producer and consultant at many facilities around the world, I have seen a wide range of opinions about the labels we put on our programs. On one end of the spectrum are the people who hold strong opinions that calling a program a "Show" is disrespectful to the animals and conjures up visions of parrots riding scooters and chimpanzees wearing tutus and smoking cigarettes while riding bicycles. On the other end of the spectrum are the people who produce these animal spectacles and believe parrots on bicycles and chimps on bikes are great ideas. Then there are the bulk of us who fall somewhere in the middle.

To help determine what to call an educational program, I start by considering the audience. The visitors at one facility differ from the visitors to another facility when it comes to the label we use for a public program. Next, I discuss the goals for the program with our zoological partners who have contracted us. We usually discuss goals associated with increase in revenue, attendance, stay time, etc., and then move to education and conservation goals. My goals for our programs are pretty consistent from one facility to another; inspire caring and conservation action. Obviously, I cannot pursue these goals unless I have people in the seats to watch the program. Our challenge then is how to get the people in the seats.

I have a strong feeling that the title "Show" will bring more visitors to the theater than the words "Program," "Demonstration," or "Presentation." I believe that for many visitors to zoological facilities the word show means action, excitement, entertainment; the very reasons people come to the facility in the first place. I would hate to loose an opportunity for someone to see my program because they chose to ride the carrousel instead of attending a bird "Demonstration."

No matter what demographic the visitor represents, one thing is true of most visitors to zoological facilities; they come to be entertained. Entertainment comes in many different forms. It doesn't have to be knee-slapping jokes or exploitive carnival tricks to be entertaining. A close-up view of a fish in a tank is entertaining to many people. A lion rising up on its hind feet at a keeper talk, a penguin darting around underwater in a pool, and a gibbon brachiating across the exhibit are all entertaining experiences for most people. In the programs we produce, we view entertainment as the vehicle for our inspirational messages and a way to extend the attention span of the audience. Without entertainment, our programs would be flat and our opportunities to deliver inspirational messages compromised by low attendance at our programs.

Defining Moments

At the AZA conference in 2007, I met Bob Chastain, the director of the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo in Colorado Springs, Colorado. We talked for a considerable amount of time about our beliefs and experiences associated with engaging our visitors. He told me about how the keepers and other employees at the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo have adopted a mission to create "Defining Moments" for visitors to the zoo. He went on to explain a defining moment as an experience that sparks an interest or otherwise may lead a person toward a caring attitude or conservation behavior. He said all of his keeper staff members are committed to creating experiences for the guests that may lead to defining moments.

The keepers at the zoo take every opportunity to involve the guests in the daily routines at the zoo, such as cleaning exhibits, feeding animals and participating in keeper talk programs. The giraffe exhibit has a walkway with a bridge that opens to allow the giraffes to walk from the holding area to the exhibit. Each morning before the giraffe are let onto the exhibit the keepers look for a youngster to come and push the button to raise the drawbridge. The look on the child's face as the giraffe pass by confirms the significance of this moment.

Susan Engfer, the previous Director of Cheyenne Mountain Zoo, had a saying that lived on after she retired from the zoo. The saying is, "Every Kid, Every Time, Goose Bumps." All around the zoo, keepers find ways to get people to interact with animals in ways that make meaningful connections, lead to defining moments, and create goose bumps.

Habitat Theater

Keepers have talked about their animals to visitors since animals have been kept in zoos. I remember seeing keepers sharing information about animals in front of exhibits over 40 years ago and they continue on today. However, I believe the next level of the keeper talk program involves giving the animals opportunity to use their "voices" via their behavior by using senses and adaptations to "earn" a living, something we take away from them

when we house them in our facilities. No matter how large, beautiful and naturalistic we build an exhibit, there are limited opportunities for animals to practice species-appropriate behavior like their wild counterparts. Plus, the way most zoological facilities feed their animals decreases the motivation for animals to use the naturalistic features designed into the exhibit. With ample diets placed in convenient places at the same time by the same person each day, the life of an animal in a zoological facility becomes rather routine.

When consulting at the Singapore Zoo over 25 years ago I came upon the idea that allowing animals to use their senses and adaptations to earn a living might be a great way to enrich the lives of captive animals while at the same time provide entertaining educational opportunities. So, we taught animals in exhibits to do simple behaviors on cue for interpretation by a keeper. At first it was little more than throwing food to the animals in the exhibits, but soon we were training animals to do more difficult behaviors. Polar Bears swam under water to catch fish, lions moved to stations, gibbons brachiated through trees and arapaima fish snatched fish out of guest's hands. After a few months we had trained animals in over 30 exhibits to participate in these enhanced keeper talk programs that we now call Habitat Theater, or Exhibit Shows.

Today we promote these exhibit shows to every zoological facility we work with. We see this program as much more than an entertainment or educational opportunities. Teaching animals to perform species-appropriate behavior gives the animals more choices and allows them to have a greater level of control over their environment. Allowing animals the ability to interact with their environment in ways that produce more positive outcomes is, in my opinion, one of the highest forms of enrichment that we can provide our animals.

Countless studies describe the value of empowering animals to use their behavior effectively, i.e., to have power of their own outcomes. In fact, based on strong evidence over decades of research, the scientific community recognizes control as a primary reinforcer, right along with the other biological/survival needs such as food, water and sex. The contra-freeloading phenomenon is one such example; it's the tendency for animals to choose to work for food even when free food is easily obtained. Providing animals control over their environment through choice allows them to use their behavior for an effect, as nature intended; and highly enriched environments offer the most opportunity for choices. (Friedman, 2005)

Information Does Not Equal Education

I have often thought about that word "education" and wondered why people put so much emphasis on trying to educate visitors at zoological facilities. Maybe its because I never fully appreciated the educational experiences I had growing up, but I rarely associate the word education with anything very fun or interesting. I usually think of education as something forced on a person instead of something a person would be drawn to. But, I have to admit, when I first broke into the business my perspective about this was different than it is today.

In 1976 I produced a free-flight bird show at the San Diego Wild Animal Park. At that time I had never seen a free-flight show and I don't know if there was even such a think back then. So, I had nothing to model my program after. I just threw it together with the good intentions, limited knowledge, and young training skills that three other trainers and I possessed. Our main goal was to teach people more about birds of prey so they wouldn't shoot them. So, we hit the natural history books and loaded the program with all the facts and figures we could remember. Of course, we were all interested in this information because we were bird trainers and had an inordinate interest in the birds. But, we soon realized our audience didn't share our attention span for this dry information. They liked the birds, but we could tell they stopped listening to the words. So, we made some changes and added more entertainment to carry our messages. It was years later that I read the following excerpt from the book *Beyond Ecophobia*, which put my thoughts into perspective.

"As adults we know the value of facts and figures, so we wish for children to know details about nature: names of trees and birds and geologic formations. Yet the names won't stick unless there's a bedding of empathy where that knowledge can take root. And in our desire to prepare the next generation of adults to deal with the legacy of our ecological assaults, there is a tendency to inform children of the problems concerning the human-nature relationship while failing to share with them its beautiful possibilities... The best teaching occurs when the emphasis is less on imparting knowledge and more on joining the child on a journey of discovery." (Sobel, 1996, p. viii).

Rather than impart knowledge, my goals are now to **inspire caring and conservation action**. What the audience members *know* about Red-tailed Hawks is less important to me than how they *feel* about Red-tailed Hawks. I have seen shows go to great lengths to describe in detail the crushing power a hawk has in it's talons while never even mentioning how beneficial they are to have around. If I want people to care about hawks, I need to give them a reason; and it certainly is not because they can crush a rabit's skull. The fact that a Red-tailed Hawk can eat over 1,000 mice in a year has the power to inspire tolerance and even create advocates in people who see hawks in their backyards or view them down the barrel of a shotgun.

Engage, Inspire, Empower

Producing affective (causing emotion or feeling) animal programs involves much more than training animals to perform exciting behaviors, narrating the action, and adding in some natural history and conservation information. Whether I am producing a full-scale show in a large amphitheater or an intimate keeper talk next to a poison dart frog exhibit, my formula for success is the same: Engage, Inspire and Empower.

I start by engaging the audience with action and entertainment. I want people smiling, leaning forward in their seats, laughing, or otherwise completely captivated by the presentation. Next, I use carefully designed dialog, or even the animal's behavior to tell stories and draw the audience into the presentation to create a personal connection with the animals. I give the people a reason to care about the animals in the show. Finally, I empower people with the tools to make a difference right now. Empowerment is what's missing in many programs I see. The presenter gets people engaged in the show, inspired

by the dialog and then flatly recites, “I hope you enjoyed our presentation. Enjoy your day here at the zoo and come see us again.”

In our programs we try to show people exactly how they can make a difference by doing simple things like becoming a member of the zoo, recycling, conserving what they use, and more. We also weave these messages, often subliminally, through the show, and we even have a pre-show competition where kids discover answers to questions by recycling items they find in the theater. After the show people have an opportunity to purchase gift items from the conservation booth and all of the proceeds go to our conservation efforts. Plus, we have trained ravens to sit on a large Plexiglas box with a hole in the top, take money from visitors as they leave the theater and stuff the bills in the box. At the end of the season we divide the money and share it with our zoological partners at the zoo and then distributed to in situ conservation programs. In the past 22 years we have now raised and donated over $1 million toward helping wildlife around the world.

Show Structure

I keep certain fundamentals in mind when designing public experiences, no matter what type or size. First, the beginning and the end of the show are the two most important parts of the program. The most impressive experience should be left to the end, the grand finale. The second most impressive experience should be at the very beginning of the show. The impressive opening sets the stage for the presentation and prepares the audience for the experience. An exciting opening gives the audience a feeling of high value and anticipation for what’s to come. An exciting ending sends people away with a feeling of good return on their investment, even if all they invested was their time. It also causes them to spread the word about the show and encourages repeat visitation.

A main message is a common thread or storyline that gives direction and focus to the routines. Without a main message a program can easily be swamped with gratuitous information that sinks the attention span of the audience. The main message should be broad and general in nature, like “Save our wetlands,” or “Birds are cool,” or “All things are connected.” This main message is supported by sub messages, individual stories or points of interest that support the main message. My personal challenge is that I can never say the main message in the show. My goal is to get the visitors to perceive the essence of the message or ideally, say the main message at the end of the show. I use the behavior of the birds and sub messages to lead the audience on an exploration so that they discover the main message themselves. For an audience member to walk away from the show telling her child, “You know Billy, all things are connected” is the ultimate accomplishment for the show.

Conflict and resolution are two outstanding tools for engaging the audience and extending their attention span. Conflict comes in many forms. A ring-tailed lemur balancing precariously as it walks a rope, a chimpanzee working diligently to manipulate a food treat through a puzzle feeder, a hawk landing next to a hole where a trained rat disappeared moments earlier all stir conflicting emotions in observers. On one hand you worry for the animal but on the other you are engaged by the action and want to see the story play out to a happy resolution. We involve many conflict-resolution routines in our shows. Like a good drama TV show, we purposely create a sense of perceived danger and then let the story play out to a happy resolution.

Delivering our messages is much more than just reciting dialog. Effective use of entertainment as the vehicle for the message involves many factors. A guide that I use for structuring a program comes from an old Chinese saying: "Tell me I'll forget, show me I may remember, involve me I'll understand." The reason so many shows fail to deliver inspirational experiences is because they place too much of their energy on "telling" people a laundry list of dry facts.

In 1989 Mark Morgan and James Gramann conducted research on the attitudes and knowledge toward snakes of fifth grade students (Morgan & Gramann, 1989). They found that providing information about snakes using a 15-minute interpretive slide and tape program failed to promote positive attitudes. They also found that mere exposure to a snake in an exhibit, or terrarium, also did not increase their attitude about snakes. They found attitudes improved significantly in students who observed another person handling a snake, or better yet by the children having direct contact with the snakes.

When I design a show, I start by creating the experience without any trainers on stage. I let the action of the animals deliver the messages through vignettes supported by sound, lighting, props and other environmental manipulation. When we force ourselves to fight the urge to let dialog drive the message and design the show with the animals telling the stories through their behavior we come up with more creative and affective ways deliver the messages. As we avoid *telling* and begin *showing* the messages we get closer to creating lasting impressions. Then, we search for every opportunity to involve the audience in the show. This involvement can be direct, such as in a person holding a bird or getting a close encounter with a bird flying over their heads, or indirect, such as the vicarious experience of watching a child called up on stage to hold a bird. The final step of the design process involves adding dialog to the program to enhance the inspirational and educational experiences.

Conclusion

Meaningful experience is the key to providing education that results in changing attitudes and behavior, i.e., what people care about and what they DO. Seven hundred million people visit zoological facilities each year. How many of them leave inspired to care and contribute to conservation? Or, is the opportunity for meaningful experience more often squandered by talking heads listing dry facts and figures about animals?

Far more meaningful than books, television, computers, or talking heads, is close encounters, defining moments, which move people, stir their hearts and hands. We change people from passive vessels to be filled with facts and move them to caring and action when we engage people with animals in more meaningful ways.

Interpretive programs, habitat theatre, *shows*, are a gold mine of opportunity waiting to be tapped. But to find educational gold we need to engage our audiences in what is truly engaging about animals. Programs in which animals perform species-appropriate behavior are engaging to visitors; and, the enrichment and activity benefit to the animals involved in these programs is an essential benefit, as well.

References:

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Rate the attention span and reaction of the audience from 1 to 10 for each of the three elements. Add the total points to find the strongest and weakest routines.

Action = Behavior the animal performs
Information = Dialogue, the words the presenter says
Presentation = Presenter style, how the presenter delivers the information

If one of the elements is missing, such as a routine with no trainer presenting the routine, then give that element a neutral rating of 5

Show Evaluation Form

Routine	Action	Information	Presentation	Total Points	Rating

Notes:

Rate the attention span and reaction of the audience from 1 to 10 for each of the three elements. Spontaneous laugher and applause rate highest. Add the total points to find the strongest and weakest routines.

Action = Behavior the animal performs
Information = Dialogue, the words the presenter says
Presentation = Presenter style, how the presenter delivers the information (obviously different for each presenter)

If one of the elements is missing, such as a routine with no trainer presenting the routine, then give that element a neutral rating of 5

Show Evaluation Form (Example)

Routine	Action	Information	Presentation	Total Points	Rating
Pre-show Hawk A to B (no presenter on stage)	7	5	5	17	6 t
Vulture flight	8	6	4	18	5
Trumpeter Hornbill	6	3	6	15	7
Dollar Bill Crow	9	8	8	25	1
Red-tailed Hawk	4	4	4	12	8
Crowned-crane	7	6	6	19	4
Bald Eagle	4	7	6	17	6 t
"Groucho" talking parrot	9	7	8	24	2
Parrots as pets dialogue (no bird)	5	3	3	11	9
Ending Macaw flights	9	5	7	21	3

Notes: Trumpeter sat in tree and lost the audience, but the toss was great and got huge applause (would have scored much higher if it was a shorter routine). Red-tail flight was exciting, but the long dialogue put the audience to sleep and took away action points. Parrots as pets dialogue bores people and needs a bird for action to support it.

Results: The strongest routines in the show score the most points. In this case two routines tied at number 6. The weakest routines score the lowest number of points and need help by increasing the Action, Information, or Presentation. These points will vary with the presenter, the animal's performance, the weather, etc.