



Reviewing Wayside Exhibits

An Iterative Process

By Keith Thurlkill

"First there was the client - - then came the designer. They had to learn to work together. Thus was the review born." Every interpretive sign project is a little different so every review is a little different. When we first get a submission for review we must ask at what stage the project is and what kind of review is appropriate at that stage.

Conceptual Review: In the early stages we are generally looking at rough "thumbnail" type sketches with placeholder artwork to express a rough concept. It is inappropriate to critique sentence structure and illustration detail at this stage. We seek to reach agreement on the direction to take the overall design concept. This is the time to make sure interpretive themes, goals and objectives will be supported by the design concept - - integrating words, artwork, photos and color in artful style. Details come later.

Design Development Review: As we reach agreement on general concept we begin to develop the design further. Specific palette of colors, selection of typefaces with leading, specific style of artwork with final arrangement of content elements, and writing or editing text to approximate length comes clearly into focus.

There will generally be several reviews during Design Development with more specific decisions made during each review. Hopefully, each review will build on the previous and rarely will we have to back up and redo work already done; however there are almost always a few false starts or better ideas that emerge during the process.

In the latter stages of Design Development we are generally looking at pretty final design products with final text fitted to space, illustrations are rendered and photos selected to scale and in place, color palette accurately depicted etc. We are generally still dealing with lower resolution scans of art and photos here but everything else is final. Very few changes should occur after agreements at this stage.

Prefabrication Review: This is the final step before actual panels are produced. We are generally seeing a full size mockup or plot of the panel with part or all in full color. At this stage we are looking at issues like tweaking color, contrast and clarity in photos, final nit picky editing for typos and major omissions. There are no surprises here. Every detail is examined to insure it is consistent with Design Development decisions.

Thorough and complete communications is essential at every step. Each submission for review should detail exactly what kinds of review is needed and what decisions will be made as a result. Undisciplined reviews by undisciplined reviewers can kill a project.

Generally I look for the following for interpretive signs during design development:

1. **Content Coherence** - - Do the titles and subtitles and artwork support the main points of the text? Does it tell a story? Is the story interesting and fun to read?
2. **Clarity and simplicity of expression** - - does the copy relate the main points with an absolute minimum of jargon in language that an average intelligent person can understand - - typically we strive for around a middle school level of vocabulary with sentence structure at the 5-6th grade level. That's about the same as Time Magazine, Reader's Digest and most newspapers. Are sentences filled with active verbs rather than passive verbs? Are sentences short with few qualifying phrases?
3. **Adherence to basic accessibility and readability principles** - - Copy arranged in bite size pieces of 40-75 words with subheads breaking up longer passages into coherent subsections. For trailside signs - - 36-48 point main copy, 24 point secondary copy, 18 point captions and nothing smaller except for photo credits and some map labels. No more than 45 to 55 characters per line and no (or few) paragraphs longer than six lines. Good Clean contrast between text and background with a minimum of background clutter. Decorative fonts limited to main heads with all other copy in simple serif fonts or medium weight sans serif fonts.
4. **Adherence to basic interpretive graphic design principles** - - Does it meet the squint test? (Main copy block is clearly more dominant than secondary copy while squinting.) Does the eye move naturally from main title and main art to the main copy block? Is there a clear hierarchy of importance with most important info dominant and less important info subordinate. Do the artistic elements keep attention within the sign and redirect the eye back toward important text. (Eyes of people and movement of animals and vehicles toward interior of sign rather than outside.) Is there white space to allow eyes to rest? Is there too much info for a single sign - - would two signs or a brochure be more effective?
5. **Minimum tool for the job** - - Is the layout Clean and simple with no more artsy elements added than absolutely necessary to attract and hold visitor attention long enough to consume the main message? In signs, simplicity with style is usually best.
6. **Informal appearance suitable to setting** - - Style is informal and looks fun to read for people on vacation in leisure setting. Not textbook or magazine style. Are more colorful and eye catching designs used for competitive environments such as urban parks, and simpler and subdued designs for rustic settings where there is less competition for attention?
7. **How does sign look in it's frame or base?** Consider beauty, interesting design, effective use of colors, and integration of panel colors with frame system and colors. Is enough margin left for mounting system/frame being used.

8. **Is the sign interpretive or simply informative?** This is most essential during the first conceptual stages but frequently is not considered enough until design is pretty far along. There is nothing wrong with a purely informative signs and all waysides include some element of information. If intent is to be interpretive: Does design draw attention to important features in the natural environment or feature being interpreted or simply to the sign. Can the visitor see or do something described in the sign? Is there a call to action? Is the text filled with provocative questions or just answers?
9. **Will the wayside accomplish it's interpretive objective for the intended audience?** This is critical. Too many reviewers seek only a sign that they like and forget that they are rarely the intended audience. What a reviewer's personal artistic and writing preferences in are is generally irrelevant as they may differ widely from those of typical visitors.

These are just some of the most important review issues - - important because in my experience they are frequently not well considered or executed. We still see too many waysides that look like "books on sticks" with way too much text. We still see too many waysides that read like something from a textbook or agency manual.

Today with the advent of computer design software we increasingly see too many waysides prepared by people without grounding in the communication principles that make interpretation work for visitors in leisure settings. This frequently leads to waysides that follow design styles more appropriate for brochures or magazines - - sometimes very pretty and attention grabbing but just don't get read.

These principles are all contained in the FS and Smithsonian guidelines for interpretation, plus every basic interpretive design textbook ever written. (Go back and re-read Tilden, Sam Ham, John Veverka, etc.) Still they are frequently forgotten and ignored even by writers and graphic designers with many years of interpretive experience.

These are some of the things I look for. Some have said I am arbitrary and capricious. This is probably true, but at least you know my biases now.

In all reviews, proceed with humility!

So how are your signs measuring up?

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