

MESSAGES & MATERIALS: PLANNING SUCCESSFUL INTERPRETIVE SIGNS



TELE-WORKSHOP SPOTLIGHT SPEAKER

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Speaker Profile:

Richard F. Ostergaard, Certified Interpretive Planner, has a bachelor's degree in landscape architecture from Utah State University and has worked for 33 years for the Forest Service on four regions and seven national forests. His specialties include design of interpretive exhibits and brochures, and scenic byway planning and design. He has given numerous presentations and training sessions relating to scenic byways, interpretation and signing. He co-authored the recently published "Scenic Byways – A Design Guide for Roadside Improvements."

Dick's teleworkshop focused on developing signs once an interpretive plan has been completed. He discussed the mechanics of communication and the materials of signs, and offered tips and suggestions along the way—many of which are included in his current draft of Sign Sense: Principles of Planning, Design, Fabrication, and Installation. (For more information, please contact Dick Ostergaard.)



Six Signs Common In National Parks or Forests

1. Orientation
2. Information
3. Trailhead
4. Interpretive
5. Traffic Directional
6. Safety

AFTER THE INTERPRETIVE PLAN

Signs appear everywhere—guiding, warning, informing. Of the many types of signs, interpretive signs present byway leaders with the most challenges and opportunities for telling their byway stories. Typically, the interpretive plan defines the overall direction for successful interpretive signs. "The interpretive plan lays the base for all other steps," said Dick Ostergaard of the the USDA Forest Service. "It defines the goals and objectives so you understand your audience, the message and the media."

Dick explained some of the attributes of interpretive signs:

- ★ On duty 24 hours, 7 days a week
- ★ May complement a setting
- ★ May enhance the visitor experience
- ★ May provoke thought, educate or motivate

"They create questions, stir passions. People need them, read them, even hate them," he said. "How do we communicate effectively with signs? For management agencies, the signs must communicate in context of the resource."

ENCOURAGE READERSHIP

What is on the sign dictates if people will read or ignore the sign. In *Signs, Trails and Wayside Exhibits: Connecting People and Places*, authors Suzanne Trapp, Michael Gross and Ron Zimmerman suggest that you have 3 seconds to catch the visitor's attention. In the next 30 seconds, the reader decides to read the entire message or not. During the following 3 minutes, the reader will digest the message or not.

3 seconds to catch attention
30 seconds for reader's decision
3 minutes for reader to digest

"This is critical to keep in mind," Dick commented. "It's a challenge to develop signs to complement the site without losing sight of the message and purpose."

"Fraction of Selection," a formula developed by Wilber Shramm, suggests that the appearance of a sign, as well as its content, creates a deciding perception among visitors. His formula states: High Selection = Expectation of reward/Effort Required; Low Selection = Effort Required/Expectation of Reward.

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Signs should provoke interest, and appear simple and inviting. Anything else discourages readers. "Sunday funny papers are an example. Think of *Prince Valiant* and *Peanuts*. Which is more appealing?" asked Dick. *Prince Valiant* appears to require more energy to read.

"Brevity in design is paramount," he added.

In addition, consider a few constants:

- ★ Too many signs clutter the view and disappoint visitors.
- ★ A cluster of signs may provide conflicting or redundant information that confuses the reader.
- ★ If there is inadequate information, the signs may frustrate the viewer.

Signs can form lasting, positive memories for viewers. Signs can convey quality and value of service through their appearance.

"They're how people gauge us. They make a first impression—and you only get one chance," cautioned Dick. "Think of an entry location for a byway or a park. The physical setting is part of the impression. Also, continuity of design is imperative to leave a lasting impression."

Too many negative signs—signs that prohibit or restrict activity—can start things off with the wrong impression. Dick suggests that you design the experience from beginning to end, focusing on a welcoming, inviting presence that creates an attractive package.

Dick referenced Freeman Tilden's landmark book, *Interpreting Your Heritage*, as a must-read source for understanding the communication principles of interpretive signs.

"Good signs don't just happen. They're the result of folks going through numerous steps in design, text and fabrication," Dick said.

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RULES OF THUMB

1. Planning

Dick reiterated that signs are the result of interpretive planning. Based on your interpretive plan, you can begin to develop the message for your signs. "Respect the resource and have cultural awareness," Dick said. He emphasized the need to promote appreciation and understanding.

- ★ Be very conscious and sensitive of agency self-promotion—the public may or may not care.
- ★ Be careful of sign location, especially those that speak of a subject at a distance—don't reference something a mile away. "We call them 'near-heres,'" he said. "Give detail that is relevant to the audience and what they can see."
- ★ Have a hook; be aware of appearance.

2. Design

When referring to design, Dick reminded byway leaders that all of the elements need careful thought: text, graphics and photographs, for example. He recommended that, at minimum, byways should seek the advice of professional graphic designers. "They understand communication and application of space and colors," he said. "Writers and editors are also important people to have on your team. Think of the difference between these two headlines: 'The Peregrine Falcon' versus 'Nature's Torpedo.' Which catches your eye?"

- ★ Layout and graphics are the mechanics of how every element relates to each other.
- ★ Graphics can do more to attract readers than anything else. "A picture can say 10,000 words!"
- ★ Brevity in text is important. An interpretive sign might use from 72 to 125 words. The actual number of words is flexible as long as it does not appear to take too much energy to read for the expected reward—remember the "Fraction of Selection" formula.
- ★ The type size should be large enough for the visually challenged. The title of the sign or headline is often 36 points over text with 24-point type.

3. Sign Support Base

"Landscape architects can help," suggested Dick, when it comes to deciding how to present the signage. Here are some questions to ask as you develop your signs:

- ★ What's supporting the base? Is it attractive? Does it support the theme?
- ★ Consider the site. What materials are around?
- ★ Should the sign be vertical or use a low profile? What's the recommended angle? Don't close out the view you're talking about.

4. Material

Often, people ask Dick for his recommendation for the best material. "Unfortunately, I have to respond: there isn't one material that's best." Some materials withstand vandalism better than others do, but no material is the ultimate for all situations. Because of the variety of situations,

Dick has developed a helpful comparison matrix (please contact Dick Ostergaard for more information). You can evaluate several popular materials in terms of their performance factors, such as graffiti removal, vandalism, replacement, etc. In addition, he has developed a cost analysis of several material types, including image-impregnated (Lexan), screen-surface (foam boards), routed (wood, recycled plastics) and miscellaneous material (ceramic, stone imagery). He has listed the sources with contacts for the materials, too. "Ask for samples before fabrication begins—a preview with your specifications," Dick added.



Four-Legged Table Analogy

1. Planning: an extension of the interpretive plan
2. Design: layout and graphic design, text
3. Sign Support: bases or stanchions
4. Material Selection: withstand exposure/vandalism variables

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“Design the experience from beginning to end, focusing on a welcoming, inviting presence that creates an attractive package”

NETWORKING STILL WORKS

Interpretive signs have gained prominence in interpretive planning as the technology improves—which, in turn, encourages new developments. “Digital has overturned what we had in the last 10 years,” commented Dick. “There’s now more capability and flexibility than ever before.”

Consult with others as you begin developing your signs. “Talk to professionals in the industry; talk to people using the signs,” Dick said. Networking helps to determine if you’ve considered the variables relevant to your byway.★

RESOURCES

Interpreting Your Heritage

by Freeman Tilden (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC, Revised June 1977).

Sign Sense: Principles of Planning, Design, Fabrication, and Installation

by Richard Ostergaard, Center for Design and Interpretation, Rocky Mountain Region – Denver, Colorado, USDA Forest Service.
Phone: 970-385-1229.
E-mail: dostergaard@fs.fed.us.

Signs, Trails and Wayside Exhibits: Connecting People and Places

by Suzanne Trapp, Michael Gross and Ron Zimmerman (UW-SP Foundation Press, University of Wisconsin Stevens Point, 1991).

Various resource material available from America’s Byways™ Resource Center, 227 West First Street, Suite 610, Duluth, Minnesota 55802.
Phone: 1-800-4BYWAYS (1-800-429-9297) Ext. 5.
Online: www.bywaysonline.org.

Q&A

Q. What is rock imagery?

A. It’s a beautiful material that looks impressive. Cultural-site applications would possibly be appropriate. The technology allows the company to do some very detailed half-tone screens and 2- or 3-color process screened images on stone or simulated stone.

Q. How do we get a copy of the draft of your paper or material comparison chart?

A. E-mail me, Dick Ostergaard, at dostergaard@fs.fed.us.

Q. What’s Fossil or Folia?

A. They are companies known for their image-impregnated materials. Folia is on the West Coast; Fossil is the East Coast version; i-Zone/Wilsonart is in Texas. These companies all feature digital laminate fabrication. There are a number of competitors. Some people prefer Folia because its digital phenolic signs seem to withstand cleaning and wear very well—including acetone to clean graffiti. These signs can also take small-caliber bullets.

Q. How do you handle night lighting, especially in more rural areas, without creating an urban setting, or where there’s no electricity at some sites?

A. Night lighting is good for heavy-use settings. An option for places without electricity or where you don’t want constant light: a solar battery system with a press bar to allow the reader to control the lighting. Another option: a solar-powered battery system with timer lighting. This can also help prevent vandalism as long as the lighting level doesn’t deter from the experience. The solar-powered systems have worked well in the parks that have self-registration with fee sites.



AMERICA'S BYWAYS RESOURCE CENTER

provides information, connections and expertise that help build better byways. State coordinators, local groups, volunteers and organizations with ties to nationally designated scenic byways look to us for hands-on assistance in planning, preserving, promoting and managing scenic byways.

2003 TELE-WORKSHOPS

America's Byways Resource Center asked byway leaders for their suggestions for topics for the 2003 Tele-Workshops.

In response, this year's training discussions focused on four major areas—marketing, funding, sustainability and interpretation. Please join us for the next Tele-Workshop:

December 3

Scenic Conservation Strategies for Byways
Meg Maguire, Scenic America

For copies of past Byway Leader Tele-Workshop Fact Sheets, visit www.bywaysonline.org or e-mail your request to center@byways.org.

2003 FACT SHEETS

February 5

Byway Integrity: Preliminary Patterns and Prospects
William J. Kelley, Eastern Washington University

April 2

National Heritage Areas Program and How It Affects Byways
Brenda Barrett, National Heritage Areas Program
Daniel M. Rice, Ohio & Erie Canal National Heritage Corridor

June 13

Marketing Research: Capturing Your Customer's View
A User-Friendly Guide to Tourism Research
Judy Randall, Randall Travel Marketing

October 8

Messages & Materials: Planning Successful Interpretive Signs
Richard F. Ostergaard, USDA Forest Service

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