
Paco Underhill

In this issue of *Exhibition*, editor Ellen Snyder-Grenier talks with Paco Underhill to learn how his work on consumer behavior might help us think in new ways about object experiences in exhibitions.



Paco Underhill is the founder and CEO of Envirosell, a New York-based research and consulting firm with offices around the world. Underhill has spent more than 35 years conducting research on the different aspects of consumer behavior, earning his status as a leading expert and pioneer in the field. His first book - *Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping* - has been published in 28 languages, and has sold more copies than any other retail book in history. Underhill also has a long history of working with cultural institutions.


Q Ellen What do you see as a challenge for designers in helping visitors really “see” objects in exhibitions?

A Paco The act of going to a museum has changed drastically over the past 10 years. In 2018 the act of going to the museum is a social experience, meaning that I’m going with someone, because the act of going to a museum is one of the ways that people can enjoy each other’s company. Therefore, one thing that designers have to cope with is that museums can be crowded, and often crowded with groups of people vs. individuals.

Q Ellen Is there a sweet spot for display?

A Paco One of the early experiments I ran was for a gallery in Soho in the 1970s, where I was just pioneering the system I used back then – using a motion picture camera to see how people move. I installed the camera and then went back and rated all of the selling positions on the wall. I remember telling the gallery owner that I was totally accurate with where she sold the most and which walls were dogs. Some of it is based on a principle I’ve talked about in retail – the “butt-brush” factor. The more likely you are to be brushed from the rear, the less likely you will be converted from a browser to a buyer. You must not feel as if someone is moving you along, so that you can fall in love with whatever you are looking at.

Q Ellen You talk about how shoppers move through space, the direction in which they move, the importance of a landing zone. Are there any general rules about human behavior that we should keep in mind when we design visitor flow in museum exhibitions?



A Paco We know that stores and museum exhibitions tend to work better when they work with the natural inclinations of how people move at the get-go. First is to recognize that as someone makes the transition from outside to inside, they are adjusting their peripheral vision, the change in light, and their walking speed. If you are the Metropolitan Museum of Art and you have lots of space, the transition/landing zone is reasonably big. But if you are a smaller gallery, you have to be a lot more careful about what you do.

In general, exhibit spaces, trade show exhibits, and stores work better with a counterclockwise circulation pattern where it puts the dominant hand closest to the exhibit. And the reason why we deal with the dominant hand is not because we want people to touch but in general, our right hand is stronger, our right eye is stronger; that's just how it works. And it doesn't mean that every gallery has to work that way, but we have to know what the natural inclination is.

Q Ellen You mention the value in engaging all the senses: can you talk a little bit about that?

A Paco We certainly know that how things look and smell are seminal to our enjoyment of anything, and that the modern store designer is trying to use as many ways as possible – all five senses – to draw us in. For example, if it's in a store, at Christmas time, it may be knowing the best time to play Nat King Cole music, the time to play the Beach Boys singing Christmas carols, the time for Adele, because you can match up the music with the audience likely to be there that time of day. We must recognize that sensual design is a marketing tool.

Q Ellen As we write our museum text panels and labels, what can we learn from your work on messaging and signage?

A Paco Part of what is an important issue here is to understand that you have a prescribed opportunity to communicate. If you put a 25-second-read label in a place where someone will only read for eight, it's probably a bad label. Particularly in 2018, we want to give someone just enough information to

get comfortable, to tickle their curiosity; if they want more information they can Google® it on their phone. It's recognizing that the role of graphics is to fit into a modern digital world.

Q Ellen Last question: based on your work as an environmental psychologist, do you have any parting advice for people who create museum exhibitions?

A Paco One of the things that the modern museum must learn is that it's competing with a broad variety of other places for the time and attention of the prospective visitor. The museum must understand the visitor; they must provide some sort of context. One thing the museum of the 21st century is struggling with is how it's evangelical. That means there's a visitor that walks in and knows exactly where they are, they know the context, but another comes in who is clueless. And how successful that institution is in being able to charm and engage with both the novice and the experienced visitor is key. We want the novice visitor to say, "I never thought about going to a museum before, but it's really wonderful and I'm coming back." The term "evangelical" is the degree to which a cultural institution takes the first-time user and inoculates them with the virus.