

"Not Working" Sign Study

Joshua Gutwill

October 2002

THIS IS NOT A DEFINITIVE FINAL REPORT

FORMATIVE evaluation studies like this one often:

- **are conducted quickly**, which may mean
 - small sample sizes
 - expedited analyses
 - brief reports

- **look at an earlier version** of the exhibit/program, which may mean
 - a focus on problems and solutions, rather than successes
 - a change in form or title of the final exhibit/program

“Not Working” Sign Study

Joshua Gutwill

Methods

- Age \geq 6 years old
- Cued visitors to participate in an interview — individuals only
- Asked visitors to read four versions of the “Not Working” sign and choose the one they liked the most. The versions of the signs were:

Sorry, not available today. It will be working again soon.

Sorry, not available today. Our technicians are working on the problem.

Sorry, this exhibit needed a rest. It will be working again soon.

Sorry, this exhibit needed a rest. Our technicians are working on the problem.

- The ordering of the signs was randomized

Summary of results

- Visitors had no statistically significant preference for one sign over the others. There was a non-significant preference for “Not available today” over “Needed a rest.”
- Men and women showed no significant differences in their preferences.
- Adults and children (under 18) showed no significant differences in their preferences.

Detailed Results

Table 1 shows the demographics of the visitors interviewed.

Table 1. Demographics of visitors interviewed.

Type of visitor	Number of visitors
Males	73
Females	87
Adults	109
Children	53
Total	162

Table 2 shows the visitors’ preferences.

Table 2. Visitors' preferences for the Not Working sign text.

Text of sign	Visitors	Percent Visitors
Sorry, not available today. It will be working again soon.	50	30%
Sorry, not available today. Our technicians are working on the problem.	43	27%
Sorry, this exhibit needed a rest. It will be working again soon.	35	22%
Sorry, this exhibit needed a rest. Our technicians are working on the problem.	34	21%

A Chi-square test finds that this distribution is **not** significantly different from a random distribution in which an equal number of visitors prefer each sign version ($\chi^2 = 0.24$, $p = .97$). In other words, this distribution is no different than chance, suggesting that visitors have no real preference for any one of the signs.

A Chi-square test also finds no statistically significant differences in the preferences of men and women ($\chi^2 = 0.88$, $p = .99$) nor in the preferences of adults and children ($\chi^2 = 0.03$, $p = .99$). Children included visitors under 18 years of age. See tables 3 and 4.

Table 3. Visitors' preferences for the Not Working sign text by gender.

Text of sign	Males	Females
Sorry, not available today. It will be working again soon.	20 (28%)	26 (3%)
Sorry, not available today. Our technicians are working on the problem.	21 (29%)	22 (26%)
Sorry, this exhibit needed a rest. It will be working again soon.	17 (24%)	18 (21%)
Sorry, this exhibit needed a rest. Our technicians are working on the problem.	14 (19%)	20 (23%)

Table 4. Visitors' preferences for the Not Working sign text by age.

Text of sign	Adults	Children (under 18)
Sorry, not available today. It will be working again soon.	35 (32%)	15 (28%)
Sorry, not available today. Our technicians are working on the problem.	29 (27%)	14 (26%)
Sorry, this exhibit needed a rest. It will be working again soon.	17 (16%)	18 (34%)
Sorry, this exhibit needed a rest. Our technicians are working on the problem.	28 (26%)	6 (11%)

Staff responses

We sent an email to the Exhibits Listserve, explaining this study. Seven (7) staff responded to the phrasings of the sign text in the study..

Table 5. Staff responses to proposed phrasings

Phrase	Staff Liked	Staff Disliked
Needed a Rest	0	7
It will be working again soon.	0	4
Our Technicians...	2	3

The reasons that staff gave for why they did not like a particular phrasing were:

Sorry, this exhibit needed a rest

Personification, too Disneylike
 Ignores work we do to fix them.
 Anthropomorphic, juvenile & corny
 Too weird, our exhibits don't need a rest, seems like we're afraid to admit that it's broken
 A bit on the cutesy side
 Belongs in a children's museum
 Too euphemistic

It will be working again soon

Dishonest - may not be
 Dishonest
 Dishonest - May not be working soon.
 Dishonest

Our technicians are working on the problem

Dishonest - we're shorthanded
 Dishonest - may not be
 We don't hire technicians, we are all the Exploratorium

The reasons staff gave for liking a particular phrasing:

Our technicians are working on the problem

Doesn't promise a timeline, which may be false
 Not great, but best one up there

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Nina Hido and Sarah Rezny for their work interviewing visitors and coding the data in this study.