



## Top Ten Lessons I've Learned About First Impressions, Lasting Impressions, and Hospitality

Melanie Thornton

Gone are the days of visiting parks and museums and simply enjoying the visit. Since I began my career as an interpreter four years ago, I have joined the ranks of those whose vacations are always learning vacations. We enter museums and parks with a mental notepad. We make notes of what works and doesn't work and then bring it back home to our own site. The following is a collection of some of those mental notes.

**Lesson #1: Don't hesitate to tell people where to go.** It happened more than once, but at one site in particular it was difficult to tell which door to enter. Once inside, there was no one there until a few minutes after we entered. After I finished viewing the exhibits, there was no sign explaining where to exit for the self-guided tour. While on the trail, the term "self-guided" was questionable. I realized how awkward it feels not to know where to go and how important it is to tell people where things are—either with signs or verbally. At another museum I visited, the opposite was true. Anytime I looked confused, there was someone asking if they could help. What a difference it made.

**Lesson #2: Be there! At one site, no staff member was there.** I was visiting a historic site I learned about in a brochure. Signs pointed the way to the site, and two signs provided a brief amount of information about the site, but there was no visitor center and no one there to answer questions. William S. Carr said [and I paraphrase] having a park without an interpreter is like inviting someone to your house, opening the door, and then leaving when they arrive. Visiting this site left me feeling this way. I had so many questions, but no way to quench my thirst for knowledge.

**Lesson #3: If you can't be there, leave a message.**<sup>1</sup> I realize we will never reach the point of having interpreters at every site. If we can't have someone there we can at least leave a message for the visitors when they come—a brochure, a wayside exhibit, an information kiosk, or a suggestion of where to find more about this special place.

**Lesson #4: What you don't know can hurt you.** I have always been an advocate of using the phrase "I don't know" whenever necessary. Both as a counselor trainer and in interpretive workshops, I stress knowing one's limits and never bluffing! But in a recent program I attended I realized the opposite of bluffing is also a problem. The presenter began the program by apologizing for being new and from another state. Throughout she followed everything she told us with something she did not know about the critter she was holding. Many of the things she apologized for would never have come up if she had just stuck to what she did know.

**Lesson #5: If you can't say something nice, bite your tongue 'til it bleeds...or no whining, please!** Nothing is worse than going somewhere to have a nice time and being held hostage by a staff person who wants to complain about their day or their troubles.

**Lesson #6: Clothes don't make the man (or the woman)!** When I walked through the door of one museum, there were two people behind the counter. One was in uniform and the other was in casual clothes. When I approached the counter with some questions, the non-uniformed person began to answer enthusiastically while the uniformed person stood back looking sheepish. We need to remember that our behavior speaks louder than our uniform.

**Lesson #7: Neatness counts!** Even though our appearance is only part of the way we gain credibility, it still counts. If we are disheveled and frumpy, a visitor may never give us the chance to show them how much we know.

**Lesson #8: You don't always get what you pay for (or there really are free lunches sometimes).** On one vacation, I went to two museums. The first cost me \$14.50; the second was free. Both were great museums. For \$14.50, though, I was made to feel like I was part of a cattle drive—herded through one line after another. It cost me nothing at the other place to be treated with the most hospitality and individualized service I had ever received in a museum. Both museums had close to 1,000 visitors in that one day.

**Lesson #9: Let a smile be your welcome mat.** A couple of places did have a staff person who could be seen from the moment I entered the door. That was good, but at one place the person looked stoic and was oblivious to our entry. This kind of reception made it hard to approach the staff person for information. Once I asked, she was helpful, but I had to "get up the nerve" to ask. What a difference it made when the person at the front desk of another museum smiled and said "hello!"

**Lesson #10: What's good for the goose isn't always good for the gander-or even the other geese.** At the other extreme of stoic was a woman who greeted me enthusiastically when I came in the door. She continued to talk to me as I looked around. When I asked a question, she did not know the answer. She tried to find the answer, but went about it in a haphazard way. After I had experienced both extremes, I was talking to my traveling companion about the two women. I preferred the less friendly person with good information. He preferred the more friendly woman with less information. That just goes to show that different visitors have different preferences. It is our job to be prepared to respond to different people in different ways. That means we need to learn to listen to our visitors-their words and their body language-and respond accordingly.

1. From Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*.