

A photograph of a museum gallery. In the foreground, a long wooden table holds two sneakers. To the right, a series of glass display cases on stands showcase various sneakers. In the background, a large white number '4' is mounted on a dark wall, with the text 'FITNESS/FASHION' below it. A pair of white sneakers hangs from the ceiling. A black car is partially visible on the right. The floor is light wood, and the ceiling has recessed lighting.

EXPLORING THE "STICKY-NOTE EFFECT"

Sara Devine

fig. 1.
(opposite page)

A view in
*The Rise of
Sneaker Culture*.

As museum professionals, we spend a great deal of time carefully crafting and designing messages in exhibitions to help visitors engage with objects and content. Imagine my dismay when I noticed that visitors to *Killer Heels: The Art of the High-Heeled Shoe* exhibition (on view at the Brooklyn Museum September 10, 2014–March 1, 2015) spent more time reading each other's sticky-note comments than the labels we had so carefully crafted!

Anecdotally, the sticky-note stay rate for *Killer Heels* was several minutes long—much longer than the stay rate for an average didactic.¹ I had to ask myself: What was so compelling here? What is so captivating about visitors' words? Is it that they're personal, handwritten? Is it the content? Is it simply that it is another's voice and not the museum's? What causes this "sticky-note effect" and how can it inform our own messaging? Alas, I didn't key in on this phenomenon in *Killer Heels* until the end of the exhibition, so was unable to mount any kind of evaluation. Thankfully, in the summer of 2015 I had a second chance with a different exhibition, *The Rise of Sneaker Culture* (fig. 1).²

Sneaker Culture featured two kinds of alternative, non-museum voices, which we called "sneaker stories." One kind was a story from a member of the sneaker

community (for example, a cultural icon like Joseph "Rev Run" Simmons from the hip-hop group Run-DMC, or someone famous only within the sneaker community). These sneaker-story labels were submitted ahead of time and went through our typical label review and design process (fig. 2). The other kind was a sneaker-story card generated in a gallery activity, where visitors were invited to write or draw their own sneaker stories on a card to hang in the exhibition (fig. 3). Through tracking, timing, and interviews, and with the help of one of our wonderful volunteers, Corinne Brenner, we were able to begin to explore the phenomenon of the "sticky-note effect."

The evaluation had three, sequential parts, each of which informed the next: general tracking and timing throughout the exhibition; timing of select interpretive components; and visitor interviews. This approach allowed us to make the best use of our time. Ultimately, I wanted to compare "museum voice" to "non-museum voice," but only needed a few examples of each, so Corinne and I began with general tracking and timing in order to identify specific components to time. This involved inconspicuously following visitors' paths through the space, noting where they stopped, and timing how long they stayed at components that caught their attention. I wanted to compare one of each type of "museum voice" didactics, (a section panel, an interpretive panel, and a descriptive object label) to the "non-museum voice" sneaker-story labels and sneaker-story cards.

1 A recently completed museum-wide label evaluation undertaken by my colleague, Holly Harmon, at the Brooklyn Museum indicates that visitors who read spend about 20 seconds on average reading introductory panels and about 16 seconds reading descriptive object labels.

2 *Sneaker Culture* was on view at the Brooklyn Museum from July 10 through October 4, 2015.

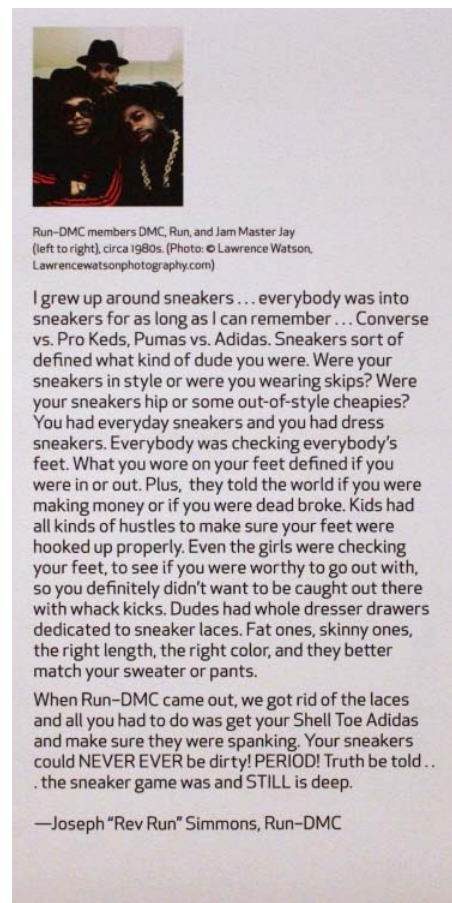


fig. 2. The sneaker-story label submitted by Joseph "Rev Run" Simmons, which is on the wall next to a monitor playing a live performance of "My Adidas" by Run-DMC.



fig. 3. We designed the sneaker-story cards with enough space for people to write or draw. Most people do both.

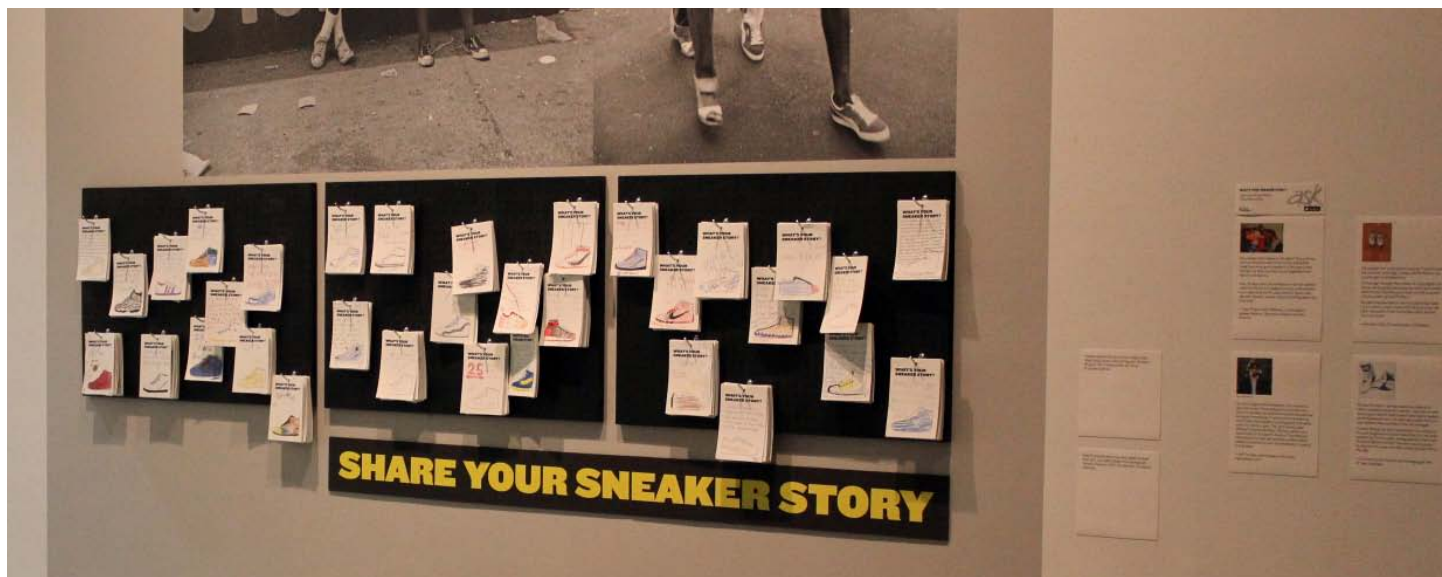


fig. 4. There are four sneaker-story labels printed and displayed on the wall to the right of the activity wall.

After tracking and timing, I was able to choose examples based on two criteria. The first was quality of location. I would test only in places where tracking had indicated that most visitors would pass by a story and therefore have the opportunity to stop and read it. The second was level of visibility. I needed to be able to watch and time visitors without them noticing me.

The next step was to observe and time visitors reading (or not) the didactic examples, selected sneaker-story labels, and cards. The purpose of this was to test my assumption that visitors spend more time reading visitor voices than traditional didactics. Yes, anecdotally I felt that was the case for *Killer Heels*, but perhaps my impressions were incorrect. They weren't.

I began by observing 20 potential visitor encounters (an "encounter" might have been a single person or group) with each didactic type, timed anyone who was reading, and noted those who passed them by without engaging at all. I calculated the average time spent reading, but was feeling insecure about my numbers: were 20 encounters enough? To be sure, I observed another set of 10 encounters for each didactic, for a total of 30 encounters and about 40 visitors for each panel. I recalculated; the averages stayed the same. At that point, I knew the

test was repeatable and I could trust my data. Visitors were spending an average of six seconds reading the section panel, six seconds reading the interpretive panel, and nine seconds reading descriptive object labels.

I also spent more than three hours timing the activity area alone. This was a separate, smaller space that also included a video and several sneaker-story labels (fig. 4). I chose to focus on timing these particular stories because they were the most visible versions and, since there are no competing labels in the vicinity, I could easily see if someone was reading them. I timed 66 potential encounters with the sneaker-story cards and/or labels (not counting people who walked into the space and then turned around and left), for a total of 114 visitors. Here again, visitors spent an average of six seconds reading the sneaker-story labels. However, they spent an average of 55 seconds reading sneaker-story cards. That's over six times longer than the time spent reading the label versions!

While observing this space, I took notes on general visitor behavior (fig. 5). Often people laughed out loud, or pointed and gestured, speaking animatedly with their friend(s). A few times one person would come in, read a few cards, leave, and come back with their companions. At least nine times, visitors took photos of other

people's cards, and I could tell that a few people immediately shared them, most likely on social media. Often, visitors would flip up a few cards to see what was underneath. I timed one visitor who spent more than 10 minutes reading cards, taking each stack down from the pegs, flipping through each one, and putting them back.

It was my impression during observation and timing that there were two types of visitors in this space: participants and observers. The “participants” drew and/or wrote on the sneaker-story cards, while the “observers” read them. It seemed that the participants didn't spend much time reading; after a quick glance to determine what the activity was, they'd sit down and draw/write. But when I looked at the data, it turns out I couldn't have been more wrong. Out of the 114 people I timed, I noted 24 people drawing/writing. That's 21 percent. On average, “participants” spent one minute, 28 seconds reading cards and 13 seconds reading sneaker-story labels,

while “observers” spent, on average, 47 seconds reading cards and five seconds reading sneaker-story labels. Turns out, the “participants” are the super-users! This made me wonder: did participants read more everywhere, or spend more time in the show overall? And did this same behavior hold true for less drawing oriented, visitor-voice opportunities? For example, were visitors who left a sticky note in *Killer Heels* (mostly text-based, though a few people sketched) also super-users? Unfortunately, those are questions I'm unable to answer at this juncture, but hope to delve into at a later date.

So what is it about the sneaker-story cards that captured and held people's attention, particularly when compared to the other non-museum voice in the show—the sneaker-story labels? This was harder to get at, but through visitor interviews, we can begin to understand.

Corrine and I interviewed 20 visitors on their way out of the activity area—people who we had seen reading sneaker-story cards and/or labels. First, I wanted

When asked what they thought about the sneaker-story cards, visitors also used *cool* and *interesting* as well as *raw*, *immediate*, and *legit*. The word used most often to describe the cards was *personal*.



fig. 5. The activity area could be contemplative or animated depending on the reactions of the visitors reading the sneaker-story cards. This group spent about 30 minutes in the space, drawing, reading, and sharing with each other.

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to determine if visitors were aware of the sneaker-story labels and if they were clear on their authorship. About half of respondents saw them, either in the activity area or elsewhere in the show. About half also said they read them and understood that someone other than the museum wrote them, i.e. "famous people" or "the people who own the sneakers." When asked what they thought about the sneaker-story labels, visitors used words like "cool" and "interesting." When asked what they thought about the sneaker-story cards, visitors also used "cool" and "interesting" as well as "raw," "immediate," and "legit." The word used most often to describe the cards was "personal." Respondents admitted to enjoying reading other visitors' cards. A few recounted a favorite, or compared a card they'd read to their own sneaker experience.

This study only scratches the surface of the "sticky-note effect," but I was able to spot a few trends as well as ask myself a few new questions:

Visitors spend more time reading other visitor's comments than reading didactics. Visitors spent 55 seconds on average reading the sneaker-story cards compared to six seconds on average reading didactic panels and nine seconds on average reading descriptive object labels. That being said, plenty of visitors walked into the activity space and walked right back out. It wasn't for them—and that's okay—just like some people walked right by the introductory text. It's all subjective; the best approach to interpretation is to provide options.

fig. 6. One visitor's very personal sneaker story.

Non-museum voice as part of the label package is about as popular as any traditional, museum-voice didactic.

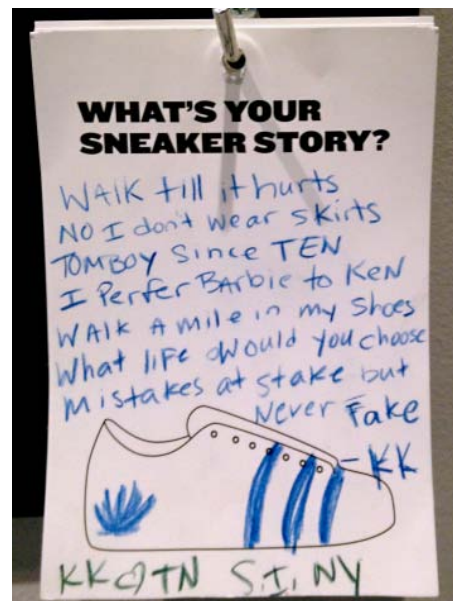
Although about half of visitors interviewed understood that the sneaker-story labels represented “non-museum voice,” on average they spent only six seconds reading them—the same amount of time as a traditional didactic. The sneaker-story labels were still a voice of “authority,” an expert or insider. Some visitors we interviewed—those really into the subject matter—appreciated that and even preferred it to the sneaker-story cards. If the sneaker-story labels were just “regular” visitor voices, would they get as much attention as the cards? I doubt it since interviews also indicated that the handwritten aspect is compelling, but perhaps that’s not always the case.

Do non-directed visitor voice opportunities prompt the same engagement levels as directed visitor-voice opportunities? For both *Killer Heels* and *Sneakers*, the activity was focused by a directed prompt, though admittedly, most visitors in *Killer Heels* didn’t follow the prompt and instead left general comments. By contrast, visitors to *Sneakers* who participated in the activity consistently responded to the prompt (“What’s your sneaker story?”) and our

interviews indicate it was the answers to this question that other visitors found so compelling to read. It was personal, relatable, and part of a shared sneaker experience, which brings me to my final question:

How does the audience and subject matter of a show impact the “sticky-note effect”? Both *Heels* and *Sneakers* focused on popular culture, which drew many first-time visitors to the Brooklyn Museum and also a very young crowd. Is visitor voice equally compelling to repeat museum visitors? Visitors of all ages? Because I did not gather background information about any of the visitors in this study, I am unable to draw conclusions at this time. I’m also unable to say what role subject matter plays, except to say that visitors had very personal reactions in both instances. If finding relevance is a goal of interpretation, then I posit that offering a chance for visitors to respond thoughtfully in an exhibition as well as to read others’ thoughts helps us reach that goal. However, one could argue that the populist nature of a subject like sneakers or heels is an easier connection for people; everyone has a pair of shoes. Would the “sticky-note effect” occur in a more traditional art historical show?

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This is something I hope to explore in the future.

In answer to the questions I posed at the beginning of this article, I can confidently state that yes, the personal, hand-written nature of something like the sneaker-story cards is an important component of the “sticky-note effect,” but it’s mostly about the content. The “raw,” “intimate” (to use one visitor’s words), and unfiltered nature of visitor responses is the captivating aspect (fig. 6). I originally asked myself how this “sticky-note effect” could inform our messaging, as if there might be some magic ingredient or characteristic I could point to and attempt to recreate with our own messaging to garner more visitor attention. But really, I was asking the wrong question. The question is: how can we incorporate more opportunities for visitors to provide thoughtful comments and make connections? Let’s invite visitors to find relevance by sharing their stories, comments, and ideas as a complement our own messaging, knowing that some visitors will spend more time reading other visitors’ voices than whatever we have to say. ■

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