

Exhibits 101 – Effective Communication in 3 Dimensions

Exhibits are the cornerstone of how museums educate and interpret the events, the people, and the places that have influenced the world as we experience it today. Using photographs, maps, models, and objects in our museum collections, we work to seize the attention of visitors and inform them, all aimed at providing an experience that will make us think, form an opinion, perhaps change an opinion *AND* ultimately, be remembered.

Another way to think about an exhibit is that it really tells a story using a wide range of elements. It has a beginning, middle and end. Like a good book, there are “story beats” that move the reader or in this case, the viewer along.

Over hundreds of years, the approach to creating effective and memorable museum exhibits has changed a great deal – from once being considered “curiosity cabinets” to today’s engaging, immersive, sensory interactive experiences. Think for a minute about museums you have visited and recall what the most memorable exhibit you ever saw. What made it memorable? Was it the setting, the color, the lighting, the artifacts, photographs, why did you remember it and what did you take away from it?

This document will help you plan your exhibit -- with some basic considerations for creating an exhibit that will have impact and be remembered.

The “BIG” Idea

Once you have settled on a topic for your exhibit, the very first thing you want to determine is what is the one single, most important thing you want the visitor seeing the exhibit to know and take away. Museum exhibit designers often call this the “core message.” So the very first thing we need to do is put into words what is that one message you want each and every visitor to take away. The core message should be something you can state in one or two short sentences. I highly recommend you print the core message and put it at the very top or opening of your exhibit. Tell the visitor what the important idea is, and then support that with the photographs, maps, and whatever content is in the exhibit.

For instance, in keeping with the theme for 2013 History Day, you might want to create an exhibit on the development, construction and opening of the first Transcontinental Railroad in the United States. Opened in May 1869, the Transcontinental Railroad certainly fits the theme of a “turning point in history” and includes many significant people and events.

The Transcontinental Railroad literally transformed the nation; changing what had been a dangerous three-month journey to get from the Mississippi River to California, into a relatively safe, quick trip of less than a week – and less expensive too! The railroad enabled communication and rapid movement of goods and people. Imagine for just a moment living in that time and how your world opened up with new opportunities. Among other things the people in the Midwest could now enjoy fresh

fruits and vegetables shipped from the rich agricultural regions in California. Your mobility increased – you could move from place to place to visit or work.

So what might we say is a core message for an exhibit that involves this turning point in history? Remember, we want to say it in as few words as we can.

“The construction of the Transcontinental Railroad was dangerous and difficult work: its completion brought about profound changes in the way people communicated, moved and lived, allowing people and goods to move quickly and inexpensively from coast-to-coast. It forever changed the face of the nation.”

At 44 words, it’s a big long for a core message and it could use some editing. But it gives you the idea of what a core message might look like.

The Importance of Research & Storytelling

So now we have our organizing message and we can begin to think of how we will effectively communicate that message to visitors by telling a story. Time to do some research to see what’s available!

As you do the research you should be searching for high-impact items – maps, newspaper accounts, photographs, illustrations, and journals. Continuously test each piece you find and ask yourself how it supports the core message. If the piece does not obviously support the core message and help tell the story, don’t use it, no matter how cool it appears.

Okay, you’ve found a collection of maps, photographs and other material that supports the message, now begin laying them out in the progression of telling a story. Remember the beginning should set the stage such as what was the condition of travel and transportation across the United States that prompted individuals to seek a railroad route? Then a middle; how did the visionaries come together, find a route, raise, money and create railroad companies to build it? What challenges did they face (financing, environment, lack of resources)? And how did they solve it and finally, what was the outcome?

As you lay out the exhibit you may determine you need some additional elements to help people understand the situation. Models are a great tool in exhibits – especially in exhibits like this where space is a concern. Can a model show a bit of the land where perhaps the railroad had to cross a river by building a bridge, tunnel through a mountain, cross a desert? Remember the model doesn’t have to show everything, just a slice to help understanding.

The Role of Artifacts, Props & Reproductions

Artifacts are of course important tools to provide authenticity to an exhibit. Using artifacts in an exhibit requires you to consider protecting them from theft and generally from being touched. In the case of this project, you might consider seeing if any reproduction items that mimic a particular artifact (i.e. a gold painted railroad

spike to depict the “gold spike ceremony) are available or could be made. Make certain though when using reproductions that you say in the exhibit text that it is a reproduction – you don’t want to suggest it’s the real thing!

Over time museum exhibit planners and designers have learned that the most effective and memorable exhibits are those that touch the most senses. In addition to sight – reading and viewing an exhibit, the addition of sound or something you can touch or smell will almost always result in a more effective experience.

Let’s recap where we are.

We’ve determined the core message, we’ve done the research, we’ve found some photographs, newspapers, maps and such to use. We have laid out the story and found where a model or an artifact or reproduction would help.

Choosing the Words – Text Panels

Now we are ready to put develop the text panels that go with the other materials.

You probably have realized this already but many people today don’t like to read a lot of words. Older museum exhibits with lengthy text panels aren’t very effective today. Museum designers now strive to use as few words a possible to get a point across.

Text panels today should be limited to not more than 100 words total (and 75 would be better!). And within the 100 word maximum it helps to establish a hierarchy of information. Start with a bold headline of 15-20 words. Consider using a quote from someone of the time (with attribution of course). Then follow with 50-75 words that makes your point.

When making text panels consider color, font and contrast. Avoid “tricky” or artistic fonts. Remember, you will have people of all ages and abilities looking at your exhibit. Insure the text has contrast with the background. Keep it simple; avoid fanciful!

Other Resources

Some additional resources go along with this primer on exhibit planning. Helpful booklets and publications on how to use color and fonts, how to insure we make exhibit accessible for all, are available for you to take home on your jump drive.

Wrapping it Up

Starting off with adequate planning, developing the all-important core message – that one thing you want everyone who sees the exhibit so “get” – then doing the research and pulling together the pieces that tells the story, will insure a successful and memorable exhibit. Remember this, a good story will make for a great exhibit!

Good luck!