
Laying the Groundwork for Successful Museum Exhibits

By Dean Krimmel

History is the conversation through which we construct narratives incorporating multiple perspectives to explain the past, evaluate the present, and project the future.

Robert R. Archibald, *A Place to Remember* (1999: 109)

*A powerful **exhibition idea** will clarify, limit, and focus the nature and scope of an exhibition and provide a well-defined goal against which to rate its success.*

Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach* (1996: 1)

Begin with Questions, Lots of Questions

The first step in planning a successful exhibit is to ask the right questions—and immediately begin digging deeper to answer them as candidly and honestly as possible. The cliché about things not being as simple as they seem applies to every exhibit project I’ve ever worked on. (The “keep it simple stupid” part comes later.) By questioning assumptions and looking beyond the obvious, you will identify your most compelling and significant stories, your institutional strengths and your core values. Ask yourselves: why should this story be told now? Why are we the best people to present it? What do we do really, really well—and how can we do something that stands out? What do we care most deeply about as an organization? How can our organizational values inform and give shape to this project?

These exploratory discussions also help you identify other reasons for undertaking what is always a costly, time-consuming and draining endeavor. Some strategic purposes, as it were, which will help others both inside and outside your organization feel connected to your project. And, while often frustrating for do-it-now museum folks, these philosophical conversations can help build interest, and ownership among a broad range of people.

Ask yourselves some important questions

- What is the driving force behind the project? (Be honest)
- What is the main idea—the proverbial “big” idea—informing the exhibit?
- Who is your audience and what, in general, do you know about them?
- What do you want people to do and learn?
- How will we define success?
- What kind of resources (financial, people, time) do you have?

Broaden your vision and get others involved

Given the resources involved, exhibits must "sell" themselves to a variety of people within the institution, from marketing directors to the board of trustees. Help build your case, while also tweaking peoples' notion of what an exhibit represents, by articulating the many "strategic" reasons for undertaking the project. Some will be patently obvious while others will prove especially valuable in discussions with those whose help and support you need. A broad, deeply held vision will attract others to your cause and encourage them to make meaningful contributions in ways you might have never imagined.

Have you considered how your exhibit project might:

- Enhance your institution's reputation as a subject authority and venue for learning
- Increase staff expertise and foster a "learning culture"
- Literally raise your visibility in the community, creating an opportunity to build new relationships
- Strengthen your existing relationships with donors and supporters
- Give you and your colleagues an excuse to work with a particular segment of the community
- Bring in new collections or help reorient your collecting plans
- Spark public interest in an under-explored or little known subject or topic which might have an impact long after the exhibit closes
- Help you "rebrand" ourselves by doing something fresh and new

Raise the Bar: envisioning the ideal visitor experience

Few things are as varied, and as difficult to do well, as museum exhibits. A British study of the museum visitor experience, cited in Beverly Serrell's 1996 work on exhibit labels, provides us with a list of characteristics of the "ideal exhibit." As you begin your exhibit development process, discuss this list (and add to it), and consider what you might do to so impress your visitors that they become your exhibit's best salesmen.

In an ideal world, your exhibit will

- Bring the subject to life
- Make a difficult subject easier
- Deal with subjects better than textbooks do
- Give the visitor just enough information
- Present information clearly
- Get its message across quickly
- Involve the visitor
- Allow visitor to test themselves to see if they're right
- Have something for all ages
- Make itself immediately noticeable
- Make it clear what visitors are supposed to do

Greats exhibit are memorable and multi-sensory; they feel like personal experiences.

Consider how people learn in museums

The successful museum experience, according to museum education authority George Hein, is one that leads to learning. We create the conditions for learning by including these six factors in our thinking, planning and execution.

- Curiosity: Visitors are surprised and intrigued
- Confidence: Visitors have a sense of competence
- Challenge: Visitors perceive that there is something to work towards
- Control: Visitors have a sense of self-determination and control
- Play: Visitors experience sensory enjoyment and playfulness
- Communication: Visitors engage in meaningful social interaction

Hein also offers some useful generalizations to keep in mind:

- Complex and difficult concept exhibits get visitors' awe and respect, but not comprehension.
- Exhibits function best when they relate to visitors' prior interests.
- Effective communication of knowledge, as distinct from creating an experience, is a very difficult task within the museum situation.

And, consider why people visit

John Falk and Beverly Sheppard, in their 2006 publication, *Thriving in the Knowledge Age*, offer a useful, and refreshing, model that describes visitors' "entry motivation." What I especially like is the shift in focus from simple demographics (e.g., family group, professionals, seniors, couples visiting along, school children) to decision making and motivation. If you're like me, your motivation for visiting museums will vary according to many factors, including the type of museum, exhibit topic, who I'm going with, day of the week, etc. So while the following model is hardly the last word in audience research, it does offer some interesting food for thought.

As you plan your exhibit and design your visitor experiences, think about ways to engage visitors who fall into each of these categories.

Entry Motivation (See Falk & Sheppard, pp. 90ff)

<u>Category</u>	<u>Motivation (And whether driven by self or others)</u>
Explorer	Curiosity and general interest (self)
Facilitator	To satisfy the needs and desires of someone they care about, especially children (others)
Professional/Hobbyist	Strong knowledge and interest. Similar to Explorer but often more interested in <i>HOW</i> the information is presented than in the information itself (self)
Experience Seeker	Looking for fun and excitement; interested in "collecting" experiences, especially when someone else has said it was fun. Think tourists. (others)
Spiritual Pilgrim	To reflect and bask in wonder, awe and reverence. To get rejuvenated; be introspective. (self)

Then off you go

Laying a broad foundation for your project will help you and your colleagues throughout your exhibit development process as you are bombarded by a seemingly endless list of decisions about content, interpretive techniques, design, visitor experience, artifact and graphic selection, and so on. Let me know what you find useful in these notes, and what you would include to improve the work that we do.

Further Reading

Archibald, Robert R. *A Place to Remember: Using History to Build Community*. AltaMira Press, 1999.

Blatti, Jo, editor. *Past Meets Present: Essays about Historic Interpretation and Public Audiences*. Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987.

Falk, John H. and Lynn D. Dierking. *Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning*. AltaMira Press, 2000.

_____ and Beverly K. Sheppard. *Thriving in the Knowledge Age: New Business Models for Museums and Other Cultural Organizations*. AltaMira Press, 2006.

Hein, George. *Learning in the Museum*. Routledge, 1998.

Serrell, Beverly. *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*. AltaMira Press, 1996.