



British Columbia  
Museums Association  
SINCE 1957

# Best Practices

## Module

# EXHIBIT AND RELATED PROGRAM PLANNING

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## Introduction

**Exhibits are the public face of museums and galleries.** Related programs offer special opportunities to expand on the topics for greater audience benefit. While the tangible details of an exhibit, the artefacts, art works and display devices, become the visually memorable showpieces, it is the unseen and behind-the-scene quality of planning that can make a simple display into an emotional experience, a provocative thought producer, a moment of revelation and learning. At its best, an exhibit is the fulfilment of a public need.

**Whether simply carrying out the making of a little direction sign or preparing for a major exhibit, the process is always basically the same.** As self-conscious creatures, we are always planning and implementing, but we generally take the process for granted in our daily rounds of mundane decision making. The challenge of creating something new, something that has not existed before, offers a special opportunity to engage in the exciting and demanding process of planning.

**The lists and suggestions offered here are simply examples** to use as starting points for your own explorations of the planning process. The more detailed the process becomes, the more interesting it will be for both the makers and the audience. The world abounds with wonderful resources for exhibits. The challenging and interesting aspect at the heart of exhibit planning is to learn how to see those resources and facilitate that “seeing” by others.



## Planning

**Planning is all about communication.** It is about identifying and sharing thoughts toward creation of an accomplishable goal. Because individuals commonly use differing modes of conceptualizing and visualizing, a variety of strategies are useful for insuring understanding and participation by all the parties involved in a project.

**Best practices in exhibit and program planning revolve around seeking a focus for the work,** identifying the essential elements of a story that can link the pieces and disparate concepts into an understandable whole, and communicating them effectively.

### **Best practices for exhibit planning include:**

- Interacting with visitors and the public to seek ideas for topics, resources and needs
- Quiet time thinking and reflecting on the topics
- Engaging in research to seek the depth and breadth of a subject
- Seeking topical allies, assistants and guides to help and contribute to the process
- Listening and heeding the promptings of the inner mind
- Writing down thoughts and ideas as they emerge, getting them on paper
- Making visible lists. Something special happens when ideas become tangible
- Keeping lists open and accessible for additions as ideas occur
- Sketching while talking, to illustrate the thoughts to oneself and the listeners
- Allowing and encouraging all participants to do the same, and to share in the tasks
- Role playing: Pretending to be a visitor moving in the space to see how it feels and pretending to be an exhibit item or story wanting to be seen and understood
- Thinking of an exhibit as a movie, imagining its progressive exposure to the visitor
- Making models, both extremely simple and complex, to illustrate and test ideas
- Making full sized mock-ups for formative evaluation and to test design
- Creating a marketing strategy
- Making modifications based on evaluations
- Facilitating consensus



## Exhibits & Related Programs

### A Flowing History of Museum Exhibits and Programs

Modern museum work brings to life much from the lovely origin of the word Museum, the Temple of the Muses, a place for inspiration from the disciplines of epic song, history, lyric song, comedy and bucolic poetry, dance, erotic poetry, sacred song, and astronomy. Today's museums and galleries inherit a long and shifting tradition of connecting worldly objects with mental constructs. Today's exhibit texts and graphics make much use of the diverse Muses in their attempt to communicate museum and gallery stories. "Cabinets of Wonder" well describes the rooms of curiosities collected for display and research by wealthy patrons during the great Age of Exploration, the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

In the newly formed civic museums of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, exhibits continued as collections of specimens for research and demonstration, much like the exhibits spoken of today in law courts. Prominent in those museums were public program facilities for demonstration of new discoveries and concepts. The collection was visible in storage display, but research and public dissemination of findings was the institutional focus.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, museums became places for exhibiting accumulated knowledge. Simply put, the learned curator told you what he thought you needed to know. However, through creativity applied to displays, great variations in exhibiting emerged, from careful and artistic arrangements in show cases, to outdoor living history sites with buildings and artefacts arranged to replicate historic cultural environments.

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the popularity of interactive science centres, combined with diminishing funds from core sources such as governments, led to a period of rethinking the nature of museum attraction and public need. During the 1990s, links with tourism as an economic generator led to seeing museums more and more as businesses and attractions.

As the next step in the organic growth of the museum concept, 21<sup>st</sup> century museums once again encourage research and discovery, but now the researcher is the visitor, and modern exhibits are designed to facilitate the process of personal discovery. A most recent trend is for exhibits to be created, in part, by the visitors. Of growing importance, is the image of museums as community facilities, showcasing and highlighting community topics, interests and resources. As they seek to meet many social needs of modern times, museums are becoming sociable centres of informal learning for their communities.

An important aspect of modern exhibit and program planning is direct interaction with visitors and the general public to see what stories need to be told, how they might best be told and what the visitors would like to see. Focus groups, interviews, formal and informal studies all help create a discussion between museum workers and museum users. *Turning the Page: Forging New Partnerships Between Museums and First Peoples*, a 1992 report jointly issued by the Assembly of First Nations and the Canadian Museum Association, establishes a fine model for museum and community interaction around any topic. The needs and awareness of the topic group become integral parts of the process and product focus.



## Exhibits & Related Programs, cont'd...

Today, programs and exhibits are often intertwined, one sometimes generating an idea for the other. A children's after-school program related to cultural or nature exhibits may find itself developing into a museum based commercial daycare program with community social benefits as well as economic gains for the museum. Community social planning agency programs for childhood literacy and parenting skills are easily linked with museum exhibits of all types, facilitating partnerships. All are opportunities for a museum to add to its economic support, engage with its community, and enlarge the audience for its offerings.

**Best Practices in modern museum work include maintaining traditions of the past while participating in the leading wave of the present and near future.**

### Types of Exhibits

**Permanent** - Long term displays that may change little over many years

**Temporary** - Time constrained, from several months to a year +/-

**Traveling** - Often rented, made to travel and be shown in a variety of places

**Spontaneous** - Opportunistic topical displays created quickly, resulting perhaps from a public event or incident, new acquisition, or media story

**Block-buster** - Great for getting attention, but can be very expensive and require strong succeeding exhibits and programs to sustain momentum

### Styles of Exhibits

**Static** - Fixed in place, untouchable, look-and-see style, passive activity, reflective, fixed in time

**Animated** - Moving parts or people seeking to replicate an experience with motion, but intended for passive viewing

**Interactive** - Exhibits that people can interact with, whether low tech (opening a drawer) or high tech (working with a computer program)

**Immersive** - Visitors and exhibits become one, an ultimate interactivity, common at living history sites and children's museums

**Discovery** - New knowledge is created within and during an exhibit, common for archaeology, archival and science exhibits

**Contributory** - Visitors add material to an exhibit, becoming contributors to the ongoing process of an exhibit's development

**Sociable** - By design, visitors are encouraged or caused to interact with each other around the topic of an exhibit



## Exhibits & Related Programs, cont'd...

### Exhibit Content - Layers Upon Layers

**An exhibit is both a collection of arranged objects and a collage of concepts, facts, meanings and interpretations.** It is also a physical and aesthetic environment that carries messages about the institution and its place in public life. It is a moment in time for the visitors, but also connects to their previous knowledge and future thoughts.

**The most important moment to plan for may be the exhibit conclusion, the “So What?” and “What Next?” moment.** As visitors leave, they will carry with them some response to the exhibit material. They may be stimulated to take action; they may wish to learn more; they may think it is irrelevant; they may want to return to share it with friends. Provoked thought will lead to action, and the potential for action can be part of the plan. A summative display created or modified by visitors may be appropriate, while for some, simply having a place to sit and reflect with topical reading material may provide an appreciated outbound transition. For those interested in learning more, it is useful to offer directions for follow up, such as websites, articles, books, other exhibits, gift shop, virtual exhibits, etc.

**Layers of visitor experience** related to an exhibit also include their arrival at the museum, first impressions upon entering the exhibit, and the transition from one gallery to another within the museum. Best practices in planning look at the entire visitor experience even though a particular project may be only one exhibit amidst several.

**Best practices work to accommodate the needs of different learning styles** by providing a multiplicity of display devices to challenge and delight differing ages and levels of sophistication. Teaching those with little knowledge how to see and observe is the first step. Allowing playful exploration of the topic encourages discovery and real learning.

### Related Programs - Programs are for People

**Successful programs spring from strong interests and real needs.** The art of discovering those means having an ear and an eye open to both community life and the world at large in order to learn how to fulfill human hopes and to link with trends.

- Include exhibit topics in discussions with friends and in the community.
- Listen for feedback that suggests local resources and people interested in the topic.
- Get involved with local media to promote interest in a topic and solicit involvement.
- Actively search the community for organizations that might have an interest.
- Speak with organizations and societies to learn about their needs, looking for a fit.
- Read magazines of all sorts, seeking trends that are becoming leading interests.
- Gather statistics from Chambers of Commerce, tourism associations, government.
- Make notes while listening to the radio, TV or reading newspapers and magazines.
- Discuss the notes with museum partners to see what emerges as relevant and useful.
- Become connected with the flow of culture and its opportunities for fulfillment.
- Seek to offer that which is just becoming topical, but using a museum connection.



## Exhibits & Related Programs, cont'd...

### Curriculum-based School Class Programs

**Extend the possibilities** for relevant school programs well beyond the traditional direct links with an exhibit topic. Talk directly with teachers to learn their needs. For example, at one community museum, a local teacher said her class was studying salmon and ecology, with live hatchlings in the classroom and nature-related learning, but that she could not think of any way to connect that with human history. The discussion quickly turned to the museum's artefacts that illustrated the cultural use of salmon as food, as a trade credit by the Hudson's Bay Company, and as a source of inspiration for First Nations people. At a historic site, a Grade 2 teacher asked if there was any way to justify bringing her class for a visit even though they were currently studying insects. An insect program was quickly created to meet everyone's needs, using the real resources of the site and teaching the students how to become conservation researchers.

### Lectures – Workshops – Classes

**Community resources abound everywhere**, with local individuals of expertise in an incredible range of topics. No matter what an exhibit is about, in virtually every town there will be people willing to share their knowledge and passion about the topic. Spreading the word and seeking feedback will produce amazing results.

**Select exhibit topics linked with the known interests** of community individuals and groups to provide natural opportunities for creative program partnerships. Visit special interest clubs to talk about the museum and seek input concerning projects of mutual benefit.

**Invite respected local authorities as speakers and presenters.** Build community audience through association with popular community leaders, honoured academics, artists, and special topic experts, e.g., BC Tel retirees, or railway workers and aficionados.

### Community Based Social Programs

**Literacy and language developments** are taking many forms in our communities, frequently supported by government initiatives. Children's literacy is often linked with parenting skill development, and ESL (English as a Second Language) courses are always seeking stimulating and receptive facilities for visits. Museum and Gallery exhibits provide natural places for group gatherings dedicated to reading, conversation and discussion.



## Exhibit Creation and Program Planning

**Exhibits Always Begin with an Idea. Someone who might be called the “idea generator”<sup>1</sup> initiates a concept.** An “exhibit designer” then translates the ideas into a physical design, and someone who might be called the “idea implementer” helps bring it all to life in a physical way. In a small museum, one person might fill all the roles, while large museums may have staff teams and special consultants. Programs generally grow out of exhibits as opportunistic and diverse ways to expand on exhibit material and make it especially relevant to the modern community audience.

**There are many fine resources that describe the making of exhibits and the presentation of programs; but planning is all about people, those who do it and those they do it for.** The spirit of planning permeates the products, and that spirit is generated by the human interactions and characters of the people involved. Respected planners and designers learn to practice the arts of finding and sharing inspiration, progressive development of ideas, compromise, facilitation, risk taking, evaluation, respect and consensus. An important benefit discovered and enjoyed by planners is that they learn so much in the process.

**Planning is a Process. The act of creating and presenting museum exhibits and programs related to the exhibits is just like any other act of creation.** It relies on inspiration, knowledge of the resources, identifying the needs and objectives of the project and its users, and establishing a goal statement that can facilitate good communication among all the parties involved, no matter what the scale of the project or the institution.

**Planning is a process of creating layers upon layers of thought, leading to a tangible result.** To be a good planner and designer means being flexible enough to move with new knowledge, differing opinions, a variety of needs, and a diversity of personalities. A good planner will know things are progressing well when the project takes on a life of its own and all the participants in its making are working to meet the needs of the project instead of their personal agendas and egos. A poor planning process will find you dwelling on personality clashes. A good plan might keep you awake at night with the excitement of inventive thoughts.

**Planning is a process of traveling through the invisible territory of the mind, but most often doing it with others also actively involved in the work.** Planning is all about connecting the opportunity with the product. In this way it is like Marketing in its finest meaning, and much can be learned about exhibit planning by studying the literature of marketing. Design is all about meeting the needs and dreams of the client in a tangible manner that accommodates the constraints of the situation, such as the site, the budget, available resources, the environment, and the inner inspiration of the designer. A respected professor of architecture taught that the three essential tools of design are: 1). tracing paper 2). the eraser and 3). the waste basket.

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<sup>1</sup> “Modeling Information for Three-Dimensional Space: Lessons Learned from Museum Exhibit Design”, Saul Carliner, Technical Communication, 2001



## Exhibit Creation and Program Planning, cont'd...

**Excellence is a process.** Constantly step back to see new creations from a different viewpoint. Listen carefully for suggestions of how to make them better. Look for threads of connection to related topics and materials to enrich the story of the exhibit. Especially seek those involving a human activity to create relevance for visitors.

### Communication and Documentation of Ideas

- **Pencil on paper is a powerful communication tool.** Key words, lists and little sketches made during discussions will help communicate and stimulate ideas.
- **Practice round table thinking.** Have a small group sit around a table with each person contributing notions on paper to share as conversation progresses. This facilitates the most powerful group creative process. Avoid flip charts with one person writing while others talk. Make everyone an equal participant, and valuable ideas will emerge.
- **Don't worry about artistic skill.** Everyone can hold a pencil. Learn to simply dive in and do it. Develop respect by sharing and not judging. Encourage the ideas to flow.
- **Make models of designs as soon as possible in the process.** Informal little paper and cardboard models will spark comment and provide new viewpoints. Because they take on their own life when looked at by several people, the physicality of models tends to erode ego attachments to ideas only expressed as spoken words. The model becomes the target for critique, not the speaker. Also, unexpected physical constraints of the real space often become evident when working with models.
- **Make full size mock-ups of display elements to test their effectiveness.** Mock-up texts to test for size and placement. Use rough cardboard or FomCor sheets to mock-up large objects and dividing walls, testing for placement and "the feel" of the arrangement.
- **Show sketches, models and mock-ups to a variety of non-involved people** to get their response. Evaluations and suggestions will help confirm the plan and clarify the ineffective elements. This method of soliciting comment will also become a marketing device, helping spread word of the exhibit to a larger audience, possibly leading to offers of assistance and the formation of new partnerships for the project.
- **Have some food to share at the planning table.** Break down barriers to thinking and sharing by inspiring the most human qualities among the participants. Sharing food is a basic human trait and leads to sharing in general and the maintenance of group spirit.
- **Identify a team leader and the individuals to have authority for each aspect of the project,** such as research and information, aesthetic display, text writing, conservation, educational programs and budget control. While consensus is desirable, it is also useful to have a last resort method of conflict resolution.



## Exhibit Creation and Program Planning, cont'd...

### Interpretation as a Decision Making Tool

- Use **interpretation of the topic as a first priority for all decisions** about exhibit design elements, e.g., colours, materials, shapes, textures, hardware, fonts, lighting, placement, props, layout, etc.
- **Set priorities for public appeal.** In exhibit design and programming topics, consider appeal for children, youth, adults, elders, men, women, special interest groups, institutional mandate, contemporary trends, and local significance.

### The Title

**Any title should clearly identify the topic and special appeal of an exhibit or program.** The power of the first moments of perception is well explored in the bestseller “Blink” by Malcolm Gladwell. Beware of becoming so familiar with the topic that what seems like a catchy title to the initiated in the museum office or workshop is actually incomprehensible to the general public. Museum people tend to like words and the play of language. As a culture, we have become so used to clever acronyms, slogans based on puns, alliteration and slang that it is now too easy to forget that not everyone will get the joke of a clever couple of words if used as the title of an exhibit. To avoid this problem, always test titles on a variety of uninvolved people to see if the intended messages are communicated.

### Best Practice Elements of Planning

- Identify Needs and Opportunities
- Identify the Audience(s)
- Establish Goals and Objectives
- Create or Recognize an Idea that Illuminates the Needs, Opportunities and Goals
- Communicate and Share the Idea and Ideas that Emerge
- Share the Process of Design with the Implementers
- Establish Task Timelines, Accomplishables, and Budgets
- Help Evaluate and Share the Results
- Take Corrective Action based on Evaluation Results

### Identifying Needs and Opportunities

Identifying Needs and Opportunities, can be the most challenging task, but may also prove the most interesting because so much is usually taken for granted and not thought through in detail. The term “public needs” is widely used, but is not particularly useful because it is too vague. For small and medium sized museums, topics of attraction, need and interest are relatively easily identified through studying local media and through conversations with a variety of community individuals. However, in this age of global communication, it also can be assumed that a local audience will be interested in a display related to any topic prominent in the broadcast media.



## Exhibit Creation and Program Planning, cont'd...

Here are some points for identifying needs and opportunities waiting to be fulfilled:

### Institutional Needs

- To utilize the collection
- To utilize the facility
- To utilize staff skills and knowledge
- To establish, maintain or build its public image and status
- To generate revenue

### Topical Needs

- A new scientific discovery of public interest (in the news)
- A major current interest story, e.g., global warming, drug use
- Availability of a traveling exhibit on any topic
- Social responsibility, e.g., tolerance and understanding

### Public Needs

- An ever popular topic of appeal, ex. dinosaurs or bats
- Current event or topic of current public debate
- A topic suggested by a club, or social organization
- A topic suggested through surveys and comment books
- Topics identified through societal research
- Topics identified by other museums
- Topics identified by library statistics
- Topics identified in continuing education programs
- Topics explored in CBC radio and TV programs

### Social Needs

- A safe place
- A place to socialize
- A place for family outings
- A place to be comfortably alone
- A place for entertainment
- A place for informal learning
- A place to identify a shared future



## Audience, artefact & inspiration

### Creativity

**In current museum literature, much attention is given to the importance of the audience** and the needs of the general public in relation to museums and exhibits, and a great deal of attention is given to the techniques of display creation, but very little is said about the nature of creativity and how to nurture it. However, most designers and creators use a common language when discussing their work. They often speak of the river or wind stream of consciousness, of “Going with the flow,” and of the special feeling that accompanies significant thoughts that seem to emerge spontaneously in their minds when the best developments occur. A technique for encouraging this creative momentum and process is to simply hold off as long as possible before committing to a specific design. Instead, spend time assembling lists of needs, conditions and desires. Allow the subconscious mind time to sort it through. Allow the creative spirit time to combine the elements into a definition that is unique to the situation and opportunity. It is a technique of letting go of preconceptions and allowing one’s inner wisdom to speak to the unique moment at hand. It is a technique of listening to the subtle promptings of thought and making them manifest through communication with project associates. Little sketches, no matter how rough, are an easy beginning to prompt discussion and planning.

**Include everyone possible in the planning process.** Front desk staff will know the visitors best. Workshop staff will know the tools, hardware and techniques available. The more diverse the thinking group, the more powerful will be the product. City Museum in St. Louis acknowledges the combination of tangible and intangible skills in a glorious manner on its monumental “Donor Wall of Fame” with the categories of Stars, Visionaries, Creators, Believers and Dreamers. Personal names and corporations are listed together in each category, with the implications that some are funders and some are doers, that all matter equally, and that the style of inspiration defines the realm of support.

### The Importance of Audience

**Without visitors there is no exhibition.** Unless a display gallery has people in it, experiencing meaningful relationships with the objects in the room, the place is simply a large storage closet.

#### The key words to work with:

**Room** - A place, the institution, a particular area in the institution, the exhibit hall

**People** - Public visitors, special interest visitors, staff, professional peers

**Experiencing** - Perception, reaction, reflection

**Meaningful** - Inspirational, educational, emotive

**Relationships** - Past/present/future, common/unique, personal memory/new idea, each other

**Objects** - Artefacts, exhibit hardware, exhibit informational media, other people present



## **Audience, artefact & inspiration, cont'd...**

**An exhibit is a synthesis of people and tangible objects**, the result of research, personal memory, nostalgia, past knowledge, new knowledge, active sensory perceptions, social interactions, institutional atmosphere, and the skills and whims of the creators.

**At the present time (2007) the role of the audience is paramount in the planning of exhibits and related programs.** The importance of revenue and popular support to sustain the institution ensures that planning focuses on exhibits and programs which appeal to the greatest audience possible. As museums attempt to join in social responsibility movements, the new role of audience as participant is emerging.

**Concentrate on creativity.** Much attention is given to identifying audiences, but if a diversity of exhibits is created, a diversity of audiences will follow. The more, the better!

### **Plan for The Audience**

#### **Who are the known supporters of the museum?**

- Members
- Regular visitors
- Season pass holders
- Donors, sponsors and benefactors
- News and entertainment media
- Museum staff
- Institutional management
- Professional peers

#### **Who are the possible supporters of the museum?**

- Tourists
- New audience – first time visitors or participants
- Corporate sponsors, businesses, clubs, schools, special interest groups

#### **What are their needs as visitors?**

- Informal learning
- Entertainment
- Inspiration
- Family activity
- Social experience
- Special moments - personal space, private experience
- Visitor services - parking, information, toilets, food, retail sales, places of rest
- Accessibility - physical, sight, hearing, cognitive, intellectual, economic, social, family/child, linguistic, cultural



## **Audience, artefact & inspiration, cont'd...**

### **Plan for The Objects**

#### **What are the objects that must be considered as parts of the plan?**

- Artefacts - cultural items, natural items, art objects
- Replicas
- Display supports and props
- Display cases
- Display devices
- Signs
- Texts
- Graphics
- Audio media devices
- Visual media devices
- Models and dioramas
- Hands-on elements
- Lights and lighting
- Walls, floors & ceilings - colour, texture, size, form
- Public furniture - tables, chairs, benches, waste baskets
- The little things - extension cords, duct tape, thumbtacks, air conditioner noise, etc., all the little things we tend to take for granted as ubiquitous necessities, which are really part the visual and sonic environment of the exhibit

### **Plan for Special Considerations**

- Documentation process for borrowed or loaned items
- Insurance coverage
- Security appropriate for all identified of levels of risk
- Accessibility for special needs visitors
- Admission charges or fees
- Public relations
- Emergency procedures
- Special staffing requirements
- Exhibit maintenance
- Evaluation process
- Statistical measurements & record keeping
- Summative reports
- Media access and involvement
- Conservation management of artefacts and art
- Docent or presenter training



## Audience, artefact & inspiration, cont'd...

### The Exhibit as Performance Art

**Exhibits have traditionally been thought of as a display**, a static, informational and possibly beautiful creation made up of many objects placed to form a designed environment. There have traditionally been ribbon cutting Openings and sometimes celebratory Closings marking the formal period of the exhibit's existence. **However, there is another way to see exhibits** that may be more in keeping with modern times, seeing them as performances. A performance is a creation that changes through time, a living event made up of fixed and changing elements throughout its duration. Imagine a theatrical drama. The set establishes the character and the background against which the progressive discoveries of the story unfold. An exhibit can be made into a similarly living event through certain strategies, with manifold benefits especially appropriate for small and medium sized museums.

If an exhibit starts out with well presented core material, an inevitable trend in small and medium-sized communities is for people to come forward with items of their own, volunteering to enhance the exhibit or make a donation to enhance the museum's collection. If the exhibit is structured to allow and even encourage these additions, it becomes increasingly "owned" by the community members who help create it by adding to it.

One advantage of this strategy is to reduce pressure on the staff of a small or mid-sized community museum, making it unnecessary to have a precise "finished product" in the mode we are used to seeing in the large museums. Activity will also bring a museum to life.

**An exhibit can be a work in progress, a place of living research, a celebration of community participation and an act of continued creativity.** Small and medium-sized museums are able to benefit from this approach because of their flexibility, their ability to make independent decisions due to the small numbers of people involved, and the relatively non-intense level of visitation that makes it possible to work in the exhibition space even when visitors are present. In fact, carrying on the work of exhibit making in the public area is a way of sharing with visitors what the work of the museum really entails. It can be an educational program itself, demonstrating the skills of research, conservation, display making and collection management.



## Audience, artefact & inspiration, cont'd...

### Exhibits and Controversial Topics

**Museums today have an opportunity to become particularly relevant to a wide audience through exhibits that present topics of contemporary public concern.** From local events and political choices to global issues, these topics often challenge diverse value systems, but can always be connected with the cultural and natural history mandates of our institutions. Global warming, the spread of AIDS, children at risk, a town planner's decision to recommend filling in a swamp for a condominium development, the science of evolution, to name just a few, all offer opportunities for disseminating public information, facilitating public discussion and encouraging positive personal choices. But, topics like these can elicit divergent viewpoints and provoke powerful responses, both positive and negative. **Engagement with controversial topics is a sure way to test and encourage maturity in an institution and its members.** In this age of rapid and global communication, the thoughtful and substantial material that can be offered by museums and art galleries will find a ready audience seeking first hand experiences, informal learning venues and opportunities for discussion.

**Controversy may emerge around any aspect of an exhibit, not just its declared topic.** The choice of objects put on display, how they are displayed, the kind of lighting used, language of texts and signs, advertising methods, display format, censorship and age restrictions for admission, choice of program speakers and presenters, choice of community partners or sponsors, even hours of opening, all offer potential for controversy. However, if well thought through and facilitated with care by all staff, any of these may become a focus for meaningful public discussions, education, and institutional growth.

**When planning an exhibit that may provoke controversy, anticipate challenges and prepare well researched responses ahead of time.** The greatest benefit of this will be for staff members, who become truly knowledgeable in the process and can respond with credibility. The ethics of combining personal values and public acclamations can be tricky, but if a museum becomes a facilitator for learning about a topic, adding value to the discussion, it will find a ready audience seeking more than a one minute sound bite on a news program. A well stated policy regarding sponsorship, donations and acquisitions will help counter problems of one-sided pressure when it arises. Rather than keeping a discussion from happening, these policies should facilitate public sharing of the issues through meaningful exhibits and programs that present diverse views.



## **Audience, artefact & inspiration, cont'd...**

### **Planning Considerations for Exhibit Engagement**

**The Top Ten Points** by Robert L. Russell, Informal Learning Experiences, Inc.<sup>2</sup>

- The title should convey the essence of the exhibit. Begin with something familiar.
- Design accessible, attractive, inviting, involving environments.
- Design accessible and easy-to-use exhibits.
- Present real objects / phenomena.
- Meet visitor expectations.
- Provide entry points to meet individual visitors' needs and understandings.
- Offer visitors choices, control, feedback, and success.
- Support direct experiences with labels, staff explainers, and opportunities for cooperative engagement.
- Provide support for follow-up educational experiences.
- Evaluate and make necessary changes.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.exploratorium.edu/cmp/exnet/learning/media/design\\_points.pdf](http://www.exploratorium.edu/cmp/exnet/learning/media/design_points.pdf)

Robert L. Russell is Co-Editor of The Informal Learning Review



## Practical planning

### Practical Planning Overview

- Discuss ideas about exhibits and programs with many people
- Open as many doors for communication as possible
- Seek community resources and allies related to exhibit topic
- Develop exhibit storyline with large ideas and many small details
- Design and test exhibit ideas using models and full size mock-ups of elements
- Begin related program development
- Program possibilities may suggest exhibit design elements and vice versa
- Involve community partners, e.g., clubs, schools, businesses, interested individuals, in the creation of displays and programs
- Use the planning process as an opportunity to educate about museum values
- Create programs and exhibit elements based on community special interests
- Create programs linked to current popular social topics and trends
- Utilize community individuals as program presenters
- Implement procedures for registration, insurance and control for objects on loan
- Continuously evaluate the processes and ongoing results
- Make changes based on evaluations to continually improve the exhibit
- Modify the displays and programs as new opportunities emerge
- Celebrate and honour the project partners and contributors

### Steps in the Planning Process

- Identifying needs - public, curatorial, institutional, personal
- Identifying goals - interpretive, educational, recreational, institutional
- Identifying the topic - based on resources, interests, needs and opportunities
- Identifying the audience - general public, special interest, institutional, peers
- Identifying the resources - artefacts, props, space, tools, skills, community
- Identifying the team to make it happen - include special interests in community
- Identifying the timeline
- Documenting of the process
- Communicating the process effectively
- Facilitating team consensus through discussion
- Creating a storyline
- Testing the concept through formative evaluation, include members of the general public, specialists, and professional peers
- Creating a design
- Implementing the design
- Installing the exhibit or presenting the program
- Maintaining the exhibit
- Continually evaluating the exhibit and the process
- Modifying and adjusting to address the results of evaluation
- Removing the exhibit



## Some technical exhibit considerations

### Visual Perception

- The eye automatically goes to the lightest and brightest element in any view.
- Work to avoid distractions because of light or reflection.
- Use the principle to attract attention.
- The eye automatically goes to anything red, and the brighter it is, the stronger the attraction, so use it, or avoid it, or control it.

### Auditory Perception

- Sound, especially the human voice, attracts and demands attention.
- Be careful with the installation of videos and recordings. Don't let them drone on or interfere with visitors' attention elsewhere.

### Tantalize the Mind

- Don't offer everything to see all at once, but use visual screens and blocks to keep some elements from immediate view.
- Allow visitors to discover and reveal exhibit features.

### Lighting

- Create emotional and aesthetic effects by using lighting contrasts.
- Allow shadows and lowly lit areas as well as bright zones and focused spots.

### Texts and Signs

- Readability is essential, so make inexpensive full sized mock-ups of texts and try them in the places they will be installed. Adjust until they feel right.
- Make sure the fonts are large enough for easy reading without the use of low power reading glasses. Many young seniors will appreciate your efforts.
- Apply common readability tests to evaluate text suitability.
- Study visitors to see what works in your institution.
- Length of text: In general, less is better.
- Each museum is unique as is each exhibit, so texts should be unique.
- A long text that is happily read in one place will be inappropriate in another.
- Try to provide something for everyone within an exhibit.
- Short texts will satisfy many, but a certain audience of early-retired seniors tends to be more literate and willing to spend time in informal learning.
- Environmental comfort has a great effect on concentration, along with the inherent interest and relevance of the material.
- Dark text on light background provides best readability. Text on glass is usually hard to read. Use only for a special effect.



## **Some technical exhibit considerations, cont'd...**

### **Copyright**

Become aware of and work with reference standards and copyright laws.

### **Display Cases**

- Provide easy access for creating and maintaining displays.
- Provide locks for security. Screws do not offer security.
- Use glass display case walls for ease of cleaning.
- If using plastic cases, train all staff in special daily cleaning procedures.
- Provide a variety of display heights to facilitate comfortable viewing for everyone.



## Resources

### Websites

#### **Designing Exhibits That Engage Visitors: Bob's Top Ten Points**

<http://www.informallearning.com/BobsTenPoints.doc>

Informal Learning Review, Robert L. Russell, 2002

#### **Frank Oppenheimer, creator of the Exploratorium, collected articles**

<http://www.exploratorium.edu/frank/index.html>

In particular, see the article titled "Exhibit Conception and Design".

#### **Modeling Information for Three-Dimensional Space: Lessons Learned from Museum Exhibit Design**

<http://saulcarliner.home.att.net/id/museumsandwebdesign.htm>

Saul Carliner, originally published in the first quarter 2001 issue of Technical Communication

#### **How Designers Make Decisions: A Descriptive Model of Instructional Design for Informal Learning in Museums**

<http://saulcarliner.home.att.net/id/desmodel.htm>

Saul Carliner, originally published in the first quarter 1998 issue of Performance Improvement

#### **National Association for Museum Exhibition (NAME)**

<http://www.n-a-m-e.org/standards.html>

"Standards for Museum Exhibitions and Indicators of Excellence"

#### **Exhibition Standards**

<http://www.si.edu/opanda/Reports/EXStandards.pdf>

Smithsonian Institution, Office of Policy and Analysis, 2002

A excellent discussion paper which also lists and describes many good reference materials.

#### **Smithsonian Guidelines for Accessible Exhibition Design**

<http://www.si.edu/opa/accessibility/exdesign/start.htm>

The key reference for accessibility design in exhibits.

#### **Alaska State Museum Lending Library**

<http://www.museums.state.ak.us/lending library.htm>

A good book list of useful literature for museums.

#### **Harpers Ferry Centre for Interpretive Media Institute**

##### **U.S. National Parks Service**

<http://www.nps.gov/hfc/products/exhibits/contents.htm>

This site offers a wealth of on-line material about exhibits, their planning and production.

<http://www.nps.gov/hfc/pdf/ip/interp-visitor-exper.pdf>

"Planning for Interpretation and Visitor Experience", 1998



## Books

**Basic Museum Studies Training Resource Package.** BC Museums Association. A large and thoughtful resource, useful for self-study or staff orientation and training.

**Standard Practices Handbook.** Alberta Museums Association, 1990. A thorough look at every aspect of museum work.

### **Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach**

Beverly Serrel, AltaMira Press, 1996

### **The Manual of Museum Exhibitions**

Barry Lord, AltaMira Press, 2001

### **The Manual of Museum Planning, Second Edition**

Edited by Gail Dexter Lord and Barry Lord, AltaMira Press/The Stationary Office, 2000

### **Task Force Report on Museums and First Peoples**

Canadian Museums Association and Assembly of First Nations, CMA, 1994

This report presenting the results of extensive discussions between First Peoples and museums across Canada provides good models for any museum topic development.

### **Exhibits for Small Museums**

Armita Neal, American Association for State and Local History, 1976. Even though dated in many ways, this classic standard has many useful ideas put in practical ways to empower workers at small museums.

### **Museums, Places of Learning**

George E. Hein and Mary Alexander, American Association of Museums/AAM Education Committee, 1998

### **Blink**

Malcolm Gladwell, Little Brown, 2004

A provocative exploration of the power of first impressions.

### **Riches, Rivals and Radicals - 100 Years of Museums in America**

Marjorie Schwarzer, American Association of Museums, 2006, ISBN: 1-933253-05-3

## DVD's

### **Great Museums, Riches, Rivals and Radicals**

Marjorie Schwarzer, American Association of Museums, 2006

## CD's

**The Age of Persuasion,** Terry O'Reilly, CBC Radio, 2006-7

**O'Reilly on Advertising,** CBC Radio, 2005, available on CD's from the CBC Shop

These well conceived and richly researched radio programs are worth a listen by anyone interested in communicating with other humans through second party means.

