How Exhibits Work
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Communications Theory

Exhibition as a medium:

- "a specific type of artistic technique or means of expression as determined by the materials used or the creative methods involved"

As a means of communication, exhibits follow the communications loop:

ENCODING – what you say (and what you don’t say)
   Content or message

TRANSMISSION – how you say it
   Putting info out there, in exhibit format

DECODING – how it is heard
   How visitor takes it apart and understands it

FEEDBACK – how we know if we’ve succeeded
   Audience research and evaluation
   Often overlooked

“Most important step” anecdote
How does this apply to exhibits? Lay it on top of the process:

**ENCODING**

IDEA phase
   - Is it within mission?
   - Is it viable? Do we have resources?

PRELIMINARY development and design phase
   - Get rough idea of outline, content, costs
   - Usually review & approval here

DETAILED development and design phase
   - Fleshing it out, working out the bugs

**TRANSMISSION**

PRODUCTION / INSTALLATION -- As it says

**DECODING**

OPENING (visitors)
   - Involves marketing

**FEEDBACK**

POST-OPENING
   - Punch list
   - Evaluation
   - Remediation
FORMULA for successful communication:

Dramatize a Proposition to a Receiver: D – P – R

- Proposition: what are we saying?
- Dramatize: how are we saying it?
- Receiver: who are we saying it to?

Principle of Singularity

ONE message, expressed clearly. James Liter: “One thought driven home is better than three left on base.”

ONE unified style of dramatization. Common mistake: some components for adults, some for kids. Want something adults and kids can do TOGETHER.

Speaking to ONE receiver: no one likes to be lectured to. HOWEVER – museum visit is a social setting; must acknowledge and allow for it.

THE WAY THE FORMULA WORKS is: backwards

- Start with RECEIVER: who they are, what they like, what they know
- PROPOSITION: given that, what do we most want to tell them?
- DRAMATIZE: only after you’ve figured out first two, can you develop a compelling way to get your message across.

D-P-R is borrowed from Advertising, but Museums use it to; different words
THE RECEIVER

Who is our audience?
Why do they come?
What do they do when they are here?

I. WHO IS VISITING?
Define audience in three ways:

- Demographics: census statistics – age, gender, race, income, family size, etc.
- Geographics: where they come from, where they work & live
- Psychographics: motivations, beliefs, wants and needs, behavioral profile

The better you know audience, the better you’ll be able to reach them.

Demographics and geographics are different for every museum, but in general:

- Overall, American museums appeal to educated, middle- and upper-class families
- Minorities under-represented, probably due to education / income variables

Psychographics – interests, beliefs, motivations – tend to be uniform

- Value learning
- Seek challenge
- Doing something worthwhile with leisure time

II. WHY DO THEY VISIT?
So, people come to museums to learn, right? Depends on what you mean by “learn”

- Experience, making it real, getting inspired (informal ed.) – yes.

Marketing perspective: what want or need does museum fulfill?

Leisure time

Typical museum visitor: wants to do something worthwhile w/ leisure, and considers educational activity worthwhile

HOWEVER – primary motivation is always: SOCIAL OUTING

SMM survey: top three reasons for coming:

- safe, inexpensive social outing
- see and do things you can’t do anywhere else
- hands-on, experiential learning
III. WHAT DO THEY DO WHEN HERE?
They come with a group; they want to BE with their group – interacting, talking, moving through together, seeing and experiencing together. The museum is just the setting; the time spent together is the true purpose.

Because they value learning, they would like to learn something, informally. So, how do people learn in museums?

Entire classes dedicated to museum education. In terms of D-P-R, enough to know that different people learn in different ways. (Multiple intelligences / learning styles)

- Read
- See
- Touch
- Manipulate
- Watch
- Listen
- Discuss

All of these happen, all the time. Memorizing list not as important as realizing different people have different preferences:
- How they take in information (Gardner)
- How they process it (McCarthy)

A good exhibit must hit as many of these as possible.

PROPOSITION

THIS IS CONTENT. Three big mistakes:
1) Jump to this first, without considering audience interest, knowledge, needs
2) Try to include everything
3) Think this is what exhibit is about.

Exhibition is NOT about content! It’s about creating meaningful experiences for broad audience.

Hope they connect with content in some way – learn, understand, appreciate, resonate, wonder.

Exhibit is art – with a purpose. Must be ABOUT something. ONE thing. Principle of
singularity. That one thing is: The Main Message.

WHAT IS A MAIN MESSAGE? (mostly stolen from Judy Rand)
A single sentence which states the theme of your exhibit.

“Sharks are not what you think.”
“The true treasures of the sea are its living plants and animals.”
“Everything changes, all the time, at speeds too fast or too slow for us to perceive.”
“Philippine coral reefs support an amazing abundance of life and anchor a delicate network of dependencies between animals, habitats and humans.”
“What is it about dogs that makes us love them so?”

The Main Message must:
- Be an “umbrella” – all other content / message fit under it
- Be written in a single, complete sentence (express your thought)
- Be simple, clear, direct
- Interest, appeal, and relate to VISITORS
- Connect to visitor experience, what they see and do
- Support institutional mission

REMEMBER – visitor less interested in fact than affect. Exhibit is experience. Allow room for emotional impact, “resonance and wonder.”

WHY HAVE ONE? WHAT DOES IT DO?
- Tells you what to do, and what NOT to do. Tremendous editing device. (New parents cannot edit.)
- Team buy-in.
- The whole exhibit and process flows from the MAIN MESSAGE:
  WHY do we want to do this exhibit?
  WHO are we doing it for?
  WHAT do we want to say to visitors?
  HOW are we going to say it?

Keep checking back to make sure what your doing still fits.
Hologram metaphor
Use visitor studies / formative eval to see how it’s working.
DRAMATIZATION

“Drama” comes from Greek word for “life.” How do you bring an idea to life, using dead stuff under glass?

McLean: Exhibit is the INTERACTION of objects (phenomenon) and ideas (content) with PEOPLE.

Already talked about people side (learning styles); now let’s talk about exhibit side.

Exhibit is MEDIUM. Things it can do, things it can’t.

Characteristics of the exhibit medium:

- A three-dimensional space
- Experienced physically and temporally
- Non-linear
- Broad audience (non-expert)
- Self-guided
- Brief (12 – 20 minutes)
- Multi-modal (different types of experiences)
- Thematic (is “about” something)
- “Educational”

THE FEATURES OF THE MEDIUM SHAPE HOW THE MESSAGE IS CONVEYED.

How do we “dramatize,” bring message to life in exhibit?

1) Clarity (main message)
2) Story (memorable, logic)
3) Appropriate experience

Story:

Flow of information. Arrange all this abstract information in a concrete context.

Some possible organizations:

- Chronological
- Geographical
Alphabetical
Categorical
Order of magnitude

All sequential – whatever makes sense for your message / content.

Why?
- Nothing exists out of context. We live our lives in space and time; acquire info the same way.
- Humans learn by adding new knowledge on top of existing knowledge.
- Brain is wired to seek pattern, cause-and-effect, connection.

Aesop’s fables, Parables, Mother Goose

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stories DON’T:</th>
<th>Stories DO:</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transfer information</td>
<td>Provoke meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rely on facts</td>
<td>Rely on authenticity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on externalities</td>
<td>Focus on human world</td>
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</tbody>
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Appropriate experience:

“Exhibit” = to SHOW. Not “to tell.” Not “to show off.”

Brain evolved to control body and sense environment; cognitive functions built on top. Multi-sensory experience integrates knowledge powerfully.

Think of exhibits in terms of verbs, not nouns. What is the visitor doing, and how does that relate to content?

BAD: linear, text-heavy, detailed / fact-based (book on wall, dead stuff under glass)

GOOD: impressions, multi-sensory, real thing, dynamic, choices & options

I read and I forget
I hear and I remember
I do and I understand

*The Museum is the Temple of the Muses.*
The Muses were the Greek goddesses of inspiration. Whom have you inspired today?

ACTIVITY:

Split into groups
Go into one exhibit
Analyze it in terms of
  RECEIVER: whom is this meant for? WHY?
  PROPOSITION: what’s the main message? WHY?
  DRAMATIZATION: how did they get it across?