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**Keep Those Cards and Letters Coming:**
**Museums' Response to Visitor Comments**
*By Eugene W. Dillenburg, The Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago*

This past summer I went to Michigan to see my friends Derek and Ann, and we decided to visit the Henry Ford Museum just outside Detroit. There we saw the recent installation "Roadside America," an exhibit which tells the story of how cars have changed American culture, and vice-versa.

One section described how car companies used World's Fairs to promote automobiles as progress, part of the inevitable triumph of technology. I was looking at a case on the 1939 New York World's Fair, when Derek pointed out a small square button off to one side which bore the legend "I Have Seen The Future" -- a wonderful summation of the spirit of the event.

Derek, however, had a different reason for singling out this object. He's a World's Fair aficionado, and he maintained that the button came not from the 1939 World's Fair, but from the Fair of 1964, also held in New York and described in the next case. Furthermore, Derek said he had contacted the curator and pointed out the error but, "he has refused to fix the mistake."

Well, leaping to the defense of the museum profession, I quickly rattled off half a dozen reasons why "refused" might not be the most accurate verb:

- It may not be the curator's fault, if he/she was not involved in the exhibit's development; if his/her expertise lies in areas other than World's Fairs; or if the institution delegates authority for exhibits to some other department;

- It could be the curator would love to make the change, but is overwhelmed with administrative, research or collections duties, which relegate exhibit work to a low priority;

- Or, if it's not the curator who's too busy, maybe it's the designer, the educator, the preparator, or any of a dozen other overworked and understaffed departments involved in the exhibit process;

- They may consider it a minor issue;

- It's been up for years and has drawn so few complaints;

- Depending on the mount and the case, it can actually be pretty difficult to make what seems to be a small change;
Or, it could simply be that, with numerous projects competing for limited resources, the institution never created a system for making corrections to exhibits that are "finished."

Unfortunately, none of these arguments impressed Derek very much, and for a very good reason: not one of them is valid. There simply is no excuse for allowing an error to stand in an exhibit. It's a matter of pride -- in our work, and in our institutions. It's also a matter of responsiveness to the visitor, which is the unifying issue of this conference.

But most of all, making corrections should be a matter of duty. More and more, our institutions emphasize their roles as vehicles for public education. How can we justify that claim when our exhibits misinform our visitors? The Dereks of the world are out there. They are in your Museum, right now. And museums, the flawed inventions of imperfect humans, do contain errors. What are we planning to do about it?

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All museums acknowledge the fact that exhibits decay physically: things break, disappear, or become worn through use. That's why we hire maintenance staff -- to keep the place presentable. But exhibits also decay intellectually: new information comes to light, old theories are overturned, new standards emerge for interpreting subjects. And when it comes to fixing problems with content, there is often a certain inertia. While we would never dream of letting visitors see an exhibit covered with ten years' worth of fingerprints, an item of content that is ten years out-of-date is somehow less worrisome. It's too much trouble to change, we complain. It's such a minor issue. No one will ever notice.

But visitors do notice. They are in our galleries every day and they see everything. A small number may complain; the vast majority accept everything in the Museum at face value. And all are done a disservice when we willingly allow a mistake to go uncorrected.

At The Field Museum, the problem of outdated information in exhibits had been permitted to grow to monumental proportions. When we began our most recent spate of renovation in 1986 we were faced with twelve acres of exhibit space, most of which hadn't been touched since the '30s and '40s. We knew we wouldn't be able to get to it all right away, so Mike Spock, Vice President for Public Programs, created the Fix-Up Program. While the lion's share of resources and attention were focused on major exhibit projects, we also set aside some time and money to address issues in the halls which were not scheduled for renovation. Most Fix-Up projects, big and small, have come from visitor suggestions. In fact, for a while we were part of the Visitor Services department rather than the Exhibits department.

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TYPES OF PROBLEMS

There are several types of errors which may need to be addressed. First, there are exhibits where we simply goofed. A pair of lions on display in the hall of African Mammals were famous man-eaters, shot at the turn of the century and presented to the Museum in the '20s. The label in the case got the dates confused, however, and a surprising number of people were familiar enough with
these specimens to notice the error. The size of the case made glass removal prohibitively expensive, so we wrote a correction label and stuck it on the glass.

Sometimes the exhibit was correct when installed, but then something changes. A map of Africa in the Egypt exhibit was fine up until the mid-'80s, then Upper Volta became Burkina Faso. By the time this was pointed out to us, Eritrea had emerged as a newly-independent nation. Re-screening the map would be expensive and futile -- certain areas of Africa remain politically volatile and liable to change. Instead, we purchased the most recent Rand McNally world map and planned to cut out Africa and put it on display. Unfortunately it too had a mistake, showing Walvis Bay in Namibia as a protectorate of South Africa, which is no longer the case. So rather than make a correction which we knew would itself be wrong, we went with another label. As things continue to change in Africa, we can update this pretty easily.

Sometimes an exhibit was fine when installed, is still factually correct, but the presentation is outdated. This was the case with the shrunken heads of the Jívaro. The original label from the mid-'30s referred to the tribe as "primitive" and "savage" -- terms which today strike us as a little judgmental. This time we were able to replace the offending label with new text, focusing on the religious significance of the practice.

Then there are exhibits where the interpretation is missing or misleading. A mini-diorama portraying the Morning Star sacrifice of the Pawnee struck one visitor as too violent for a family museum, and she wrote us a letter accusing us of racism, sexism, and all the other -isms. Mike Spock decided to turn this into a learning opportunity, and we built a talk-back station: we presented the woman's letter on a bulletin board and asked visitors to write back on index cards. The overwhelming response was "if it's accurate leave it up; don't censor history."

The exhibit was largely accurate; it simply wasn't well-interpreted. Labelling consisted of a single 13-word caption. So we installed new text to explain the ritual more fully, and we corrected a few minor errors in the figures.

Some errors are actually intentional, and may need to be explained to the visitor. Our bird hall lists the Eskimo curlew as extinct, but someone wrote in to say it is officially listed as "endangered." This is true. The reason has to do with the politics of maintaining the endangered species list: although the curlew has not been sighted in some 70 years, if it removed from the endangered list, then its habitat is no longer protected. In this instance, the exhibit developers felt "extinct" more accurately reflected the species' true status. We left the exhibit alone, and wrote a letter to the visitor.

SOURCE OF COMMENTS

There are three general sources for comments: your regular visitors, invited guests, and the internal audience.

Our plant hall features several species of North American woods. The range maps included some Canadian provinces -- Assiniboia and Athabaska -- which had not existed since 1895. These maps were apparently installed when the Museum first opened, had been out-of-date for nearly a century. A Canadian visitor pointed out the error, which I took to one of the Botany curators. He said, Yeah,
we've heard this before, but we only get one complaint every ten years or so, and fixing the maps seemed like too much work for something nobody notices.

Well, it may be true that only once per decade does an observant Canadian wander through our plant hall. On the other hand, every day hundreds of Americans go through there, and we have been feeding them information that was wrong before my grandfather was born. Certainly, we weren't doing anything to help America's well-documented deficiency in geographical knowledge. So we made new maps. The designers decided to side-step the issue entirely and not present any Canadian provinces -- I guess they're anticipating Quebec secession -- and use a projection which distorts polar regions, but at least we've entered the 20th century.

A visitor from England what quite upset with our coal display. A particular West Yorkshire mining town was identified as being in North Yorkshire. This one sat on my desk for a while, because the entire exhibit had been done with those 1940s-style press-on letters, which are difficult to install and impossible to change. Then our lead preparator, Mike Paha, had a great idea: instead of trying to change the letters, why not install a new ID label on top of the old, incorrect one? We did our best to match the color and style of the label to the case. It does stick out a bit, but at least it presents accurate information.

Invited guests also notice problems, which can be embarrassing. One of our Anthropology curators was giving a tour to a group of Korean journalists when they came across our exhibit of Chinese jade. One map seemed to indicate that Korea was a part of China in the 1700s. This was false; the map shows area of cultural influence rather than political borders. Clearly, it needed more explanation. The problem was that this label is back-lit, and any changes would require re-screening the entire piece.

Then, we got lucky. A volunteer in Education had an extra label-maker at her office and donated it to the Museum. It prints black letters on strips of clear plastic: the perfect solution for this situation! Making and installing a new caption took half an hour and cost nothing.

Another very important group of invited guests are American Indians. In response to NAGPRA notification, the Pawnee came to view our collections and exhibits, and asked that a number of ceremonial objects be removed from display. The Field Museum responds to these requests as quickly as possible, which means I sometimes walk in the office at 8:30 in the morning and find a message saying "Gene, we're going to deinstall an entire case today!" Or, more likely, "Gene, we deinstalled this case last week, can you put up a sign?" Advance warning is not one of our strong points. Fortunately, we've been through this several times with a number of tribes, and working with Anthropology I've developed a standard label for this circumstance which can be altered to suit the particular tribe and objects removed.

Preparing for this speech, I noticed that a large number of comments came from foreign visitors. I suspect this is because Americans as a whole do not know much about other cultures and thus do not notice the mistakes; indeed, they accept the information as given. Only someone familiar with another land would notice these sorts of errors.

A third source of comments is your internal audience. Everyone on staff has their favorite exhibit, and you will probably find that everyone who gets out on the floor regularly also has their favorite
mistake. The problem with the shrunken heads, for instance, was noticed by a member of our Board. One of the developers on the Africa exhibit noticed another label in the South American hall which describes the material culture of the Eastern Andes as "exhibiting a strange absence of beauty." We used this as an opportunity to explain a little about modern anthropology, and how museums aren't in the business of imposing values, but presenting them.

RESPONSE

Every museum gets these sorts of comments, from a variety of sources. But given that the average museum has no system, no money, and no staff for updating exhibit content, how do we respond when such errors are brought to our attention? At The Field Museum, the procedure is something like this:

1. Make a list of such problems.

2. Prioritize. It's a judgement call, but things which are clearly offensive or grossly inaccurate deserve immediate attention; some others can probably wait.

3. Consider the scope of the project. Can this be fixed with a label, or do we need to make more substantial revisions? This is also a time to review what, if any, resources are available. Remember the Law of the Conservation of Adjectives: work on a project can be good, fast, or cheap, but only two of the three. For most of us cheap is a prerequisite, and the whole idea is to make changes that aren't being made fast enough. So we must sometimes cut corners on aesthetics to avoid embarrassing ourselves with faulty content.

4. Find someone to do the exhibit development. Don't try to do it yourself, especially on big projects. I've found that interns and volunteers, particularly college students, make excellent researchers and pretty good writers (all those term papers, I guess). Of course all work by paid or volunteer staff has to be reviewed for content and style.

One project requiring a significant response was the Hopi exhibit. Several dioramas built in 1904 featured sacred objects and portrayed secret rituals, and tribal elders asked that they be taken off display. This was a top priority, and we immediately covered the dioramas with medite. Unfortunately this created a large blank spot in the hall, and an urgent need to "do something" with the space. After a series of false starts, an intern came on board who made this her project. She did the research, wrote the copy, selected the photos and artifacts -- all with help from editors, designers, curators, etc. -- and we finally installed the exhibit this fall.

The exact same situation arose with a Navaho case, but the initial response was much simpler. After the case was emptied, I planned to post a version of our standard label. Then I learned that the Navaho had written a concise, straight-forward letter to the Museum, explaining why the display was inappropriate. We felt it would be better to let them explain the issue in their own words, so we laminated the letter and stuck it on the case. I currently have another intern developing a new display; in the meantime the letter explains why the case is empty.

In the plant hall we had a different problem: rather than one big mistake, we had accumulated a list of about a dozen minor errors -- things like misspellings in the Latin names, switched ID numbers,
etc. However, the exhibit text is screened onto very fancy polished wood panels, making this was a low priority: a big, expensive project and issues which, compared to others, weren't that pressing. Then our chief graphics designer noticed all the labels I'd been plastering around, and suggested we tie them together into a single system. I said, if it doesn't slow me down, fine. So she produced a set of blank forms with "UPDATE!" printed at the top, which we tried out in the plant hall and since have used throughout the Museum whenever circumstances prevent us from actually replacing the existing label. I like them so much, I'm planning to go back to labels I installed years ago, and bring them into line with this system.

In most instances, it is better to replace an erroneous label with a new, correct one. We always try to match the new label with the color, style, and design of the rest of the exhibit. But if this is not possible, accuracy of information takes precedence over aesthetics. Or, put another way, "simple and right beats beautiful but wrong."

However, it is not always possible to replace the offending label: it may be too expensive to replicate, or inaccessible, or there may be other problems. (The East Andes case, installed in the early 1930s, mounted artifacts to the screen with glue and nails. Trying to remove them or the label would potentially expose the artifacts to damage, so we decided to leave the contents alone and post a correction outside the case.) In these cases, the erroneous label is left on display, and a correction label is posted in a prominent location nearby.

Of course, labelling is not the answer to every problem. Our old Prehistoric People exhibit had serious problems: it started with "Homo erectus in Europe," largely because when it was built in the 1930s, not much was known from Africa. A visitor suggested a bulletin board to keep the exhibit up-to-date on this rapidly changing field. When I mentioned this to an intern as a possible project her eyes lit up -- she had just taken a class in physical anthropology -- and she knocked it out in about two months.

MAKING A LABEL

Fixing the error in the shrunken heads exhibit was a simple job; all it needed was a new label. The project took 17 months to complete. At The Field Museum, most Exhibit staff schedule their work months in advance, which doesn't help much when things pop up unexpectedly. So the label sat in editing for nine months, in design for four months, and in production for three months, where they lost it and I had to make another. I've since learned that every step I can do myself is one less step that can get delayed elsewhere.

Thanks to laser-jet printers and scalable-font programs, anybody can produce quality labels quickly and easily. The specifications I use came from our head graphics designer, and I simply repeat them every time. All these supplies are available in any decent-sized graphics supply store.

Set your label in a Roman typeface, something with serifs, because it's easier to read. Make the headline 24 to 30 point bold type, and the body copy between 18 and 24 points. If possible (and you can do this in Word Perfect) make the line spacing 1.1 or 1.2 -- it adds space between lines and makes the copy more readable. If you need to stress a word, use italics rather than boldface or underline. Justify the left margin of the copy, but leave the right margin ragged -- justifying both margins creates odd spacing between words.
Print the label on a buff or lightly colored paper; a designer can help you pick something to match the exhibit. Use a cutting board to trim the label to an appropriate size. Mount the label to a cardboard backing -- matte or crescent board work fine --using spray mount or Twin-tack (also known as Mac-tack), which are large sheets of double-sided tape. Use a burnisher to work out air bubbles, then cut away excess board. If the label will be outside of the case, I strongly advise you to cover it with laminating plastic to protect your work from countless fingering. These come in easy-to-use sheets 9" by 12", under the name "Cleer Adhere." Use a burnisher again, and wrap any excess around the sides. You can use double-stick tape to put it up (though be aware, it will destroy painted surfaces), and a t-square or drafting triangle to make it level.

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Of course, it's not all gravy. My favorite project was the hall of Asian Mammals, which we completed in 1991. This exhibit was originally installed in the early '30s after the Museum sponsored an expedition by Theodore and Kermit Roosevelt. The labels described these animals from a big-game hunter's point of view. For instance, the Takin display told us "it is very difficult to reach their mountain retreats and even more so to find and shoot them." Meanwhile, the adjacent hall was undergoing a major renovation, to become an exhibit on ecology and environment. Clearly, Asian Mammals needed help.

So we wrote new labels. The best was for the Gaur, a 2,000-pound bovid with white forelegs which defends itself from predators through its sheer bulk, but is endangered by loss of habitat. The obvious headline was "White Sox crush Tigers, but lose ground to Indians." This has received some negative comments internally; someone in education complained the label appealed exclusively to the "baseball sub-culture." I gently pointed out that this "sub-culture" comprises the entire nation, as Ken Burns has so amply demonstrated.

We also received one letter from a visitor incensed that we had removed the information about the hunting expedition, saying we were being politically correct. Well, no one calls me that and gets away with it. I responded, explaining that 3/4 of these animals are now endangered, making the hunting information moot. The new labels more accurately reflect our educational mission.

But we had the most trouble with the range maps. They accompanied every case and still showed the world of 1930: Persia, Siam, and French Indochina. While we were working on the updates, a Vietnamese immigrant complained about our maps in one of our local newspapers, which required a response. When Burma then became Myanmar, we decided not take any chances. We eliminated all borders, and simply indicated the three countries least likely to disappear anytime soon: India, China, and... the Soviet Union.

Three weeks after installation, the Kremlin collapsed.

Changing those maps again has been a low priority - largely due to exasperation, but also because most people know the Soviet Union is gone and they know it happened recently, so they'll give us some slack (unlike visitors from Bangladesh and Belize who, justifiably, complain about labels which still refer to East Pakistan and British Honduras). I also wanted to see how long it would take before we would start getting pressure to change the maps again. In October 1994 I received
my first letter, about a label in the Gem Room which cites Moscow as the capital of a country which no longer exists. The world turns, and eternal vigilance is the price we pay for trying to interpret its endless gyrations.