Exhibit Development 101: From Idea to Plan
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Welcome

This is Exhibit Development 101. We will be looking at exhibits as an educational medium for communicating information.

Of course, exhibits are many other things as well:
   physical experiences
   social settings
   evocative, inspirational, emotive, etc.
…in addition to being a form of education.

But, we can't cover everything in half a day. We will focus on making exhibits more effective educational tools. We will also be taking an abstract, theoretical approach – with the recognition that theory always has to be adjusted when it comes into contact with the real world. And, finally, we are only talk today about exhibit content. We will not touch on designing or building the exhibit – only on figuring out what we want the exhibit to say.

Medium and Message

Exhibits are a medium – a means of communication. Other media include:
   Books
   Newspapers
   TV
   Radio
   Movies
   Music
   Dance
   Poetry
   Theater
Back in the 1960s, the philosopher Marshall McLuhan argued: “The medium is the message.” What you say is less important than how you say it.

Today, most people would say McLuhan was wrong – content is still the point of any communication. However, the medium you use shapes message. Every medium has features which influence the message it contains. Some things are possible, other things are impossible. Some things are harder to do in one medium, but easier to do in another.

As an example, consider recorded sound, especially music.

The first widely-produced format for recorded music was the ten-inch, 78 rpm disk, introduced after World War I. (The size and speed had little to do with any musical considerations – rather, they were the by-product of some commonly-available gears and motors. Put them together, and 78 revolutions per minute is what you happened to get.)

What are some of the features of this medium? One big limitation was sound quality. Low sounds (bass, drums, oboe, tuba) and soft instruments (piano and guitar, before they were electrified) did not record well, and were hard to hear. Loud instruments (most brass) and high-pitched instruments (most strings and woodwinds) recorded well, and became much more prominent in popular music. Similarly, deep male voices did not record as well as tenors, sopranos, and female voices.

Another limitation was length. You could only get about 3 minutes of music on a disk. Longer forms of music – operas, symphonies, even some jazz and folk songs – could not be recorded, at least in their entirety. Songwriters had to learn to write 3-minute pop songs. (This limitation was so powerful, that 20 years after the 78 rpm died out, the vast majority of pop songs were still around 3 minutes in length.)

Another result of the time limit was an emphasis on the single song. Each tune
had to stand on its own. Complicated song cycles simply weren’t possible. This focus on the single song lives on today in “top 40 lists,” “hit records,” etc.

In the 1950s, the long-playing record (LP) was introduced. Twelve inches across, and spinning at 33 1/3 rpm, you could fit about 25 minutes of music on a side. Longer works could now be recorded. While these were mostly classical at first, eventually pop and jazz musicians began writing longer pieces. This eventually led to thematic and “concept” albums. And the fact that artists had to record and release many songs at once meant that a lot more music was recorded – and a lot of it was pretty bad.

Engineers eventually figured out how to make stereo recordings, which opened up whole new areas of sound that simply were not available in the era of the 78. But, records were still linear – you started at one end and played all the way through. Picking out and playing individual songs was difficult. Artists took advantage of this, often putting their strongest songs first and last on a side, figuring that most people would just let the disk play.

In the 1980s, CD came into being. They offered even more recording time, up to 75 minutes total – which again meant more mediocre music. But it also made anthologies and career retrospectives easier to compile. CDs are also programmable, making it much easier to skip the songs you don’t like. As a result, artists began “front-loading” – putting all their good songs at the beginning of the disc.

(CDs can also be played at random. Some artists have embraced this, recording discs full of short songs that are meant to be played in shuffled order. Others have rebelled against this, splitting up a single song into many small parts that make no sense when shuffled.)

CDs can also include special features, like music videos or text files. And they are portable – you can listen to your music anywhere.

The latest thing is the Ipod, where you go on-line and download the music you want. Exactly how this will influence music remains to be seen. But a couple of things are likely. For one, there seems to be an emphasis back to the individual song – no need to download an entire album if you only want the hits, and thus, no need for artists to continue recording an album’s worth of material at a time.
Second, the consumer is now much more in control of their experience. You get to decide what music you buy and how you listen to it, not the record company.

What does all this have to do with exhibits?  
*The Medium shapes the Message!*  
There are things you can do on an LP that you cannot do on a 78.  
There are things you can do on a CD that you cannot do on an LP.

By the same token, there are things you can do in an exhibit that you cannot do in a book, movie, or a photograph. And, there are things that you can do in other media, that are difficult or impossible to pull off in an exhibit.

The features of any medium dictate:  
what you can and cannot accomplish  
how you accomplish it

In this workshop, we'll discuss how exhibits accomplish the task of conveying information.

**What are the features of an exhibit?**  
- A three-dimensional space  
- Experienced physically (you walk through it) and temporally (you spend time there)  
- Broad audience (a huge majority of our visitors are non-experts)  
- Self-guided (the visitor decides when and where to go, where to start, what to see or not see, and in what order)  
- Limited time (most visitors only spend 15 – 20 minutes in a gallery, and rarely will go back to see what they’ve missed)  
- Multi-modal (different types of experiences)  
- Thematic (is “about” something)  
- “Educational”

How is an exhibit like or not like:  
- A book? Both a book and an exhibit contain information. But, a book is linear, one-dimensional, and a non-social, experience. A book takes a lot more time, and people will put it down and pick it up again.
A classroom? Again, both contain information, and both are social. But a classroom is a formal setting. Students often have no choice but to be there, no choice in what they are taught, and no choice in the pacing. You often have to complete one course before moving on to the next; exhibits are open to everyone. And classroom lectures are often not very visual.

TV? Again, there is information, and it is visual. But TV is a very passive experience – you just sit back and it washes over you. The viewer doesn’t have to do anything, or engage in anything beyond clicking the remote. The info is linear and one-dimensional. The experience is rarely social – even if you watch TV with a group of people, you rarely interact with them during the show.

The Web? Here you have information, and like an exhibit it is non-linear – you can go anywhere you want. But again, it is a non-social, one-dimensional experience.

A theme park? Some people accuse modern exhibits of being like theme parks. And yes, both settings emphasize experience, offer free-choice wandering, and feature social interaction. But the big difference is: exhibits contain information; theme parks are just for fun.

How does this affect the educational content of an exhibit?

1) The content must be appropriate for a physical experience. If your content is abstract and cannot be conveyed physically, then it is not a good candidate for an exhibit.
2) The content must be accessible to lay audience visiting of their own accord.
3) The content must be accessible through random access.

Here I like to use the metaphor of a hologram. A hologram is a three-dimensional photograph. An object is recorded from every angle, and that information is embedded into every part of the hologram. Then, when light shines through it at different angles, you see those different images.

The first holograms were made of glass. And if you shattered it, you could pick up one of the shards, and still see the object. The entire image was embedded into each piece.

A good exhibit has to be like that. When a visitor enters a gallery, they are only going to go to a few of the components. They are only going to pick up a few of the shards, and we don’t know which ones. So we have to make sure that the message we are trying to get across is embedded into each piece.

How do we do that? Experience and visitor studies tell us that if we structure content in
certain ways, visitors are more likely to get our point. There are three main steps:
- Main Message
- Story line
- Exhibit plan

**Main Message**

**WHAT IS A MAIN MESSAGE?**
A single sentence which states the theme of your exhibit.

The Main Message must:
- Be an “umbrella” for your content – all other exhibit content and messages fit under it
- Be written in a single, complete sentence (express your thought, not compile a laundry list)
- Be simple, clear, direct – not overly complicated, and written in the visitors’ language.
- Interest, appeal, and relate to VISITORS
- Connect to visitor experience, what they see and do
- Support institutional mission

Some examples:

“Sharks are not what you think.” (This message is very simple, clear and direct. It does not list any information, but rather an attitude, and one that appeals to many visitors.)

“The true treasures of the sea are its living plants and animals.” (Again, written in terms the visitor would understand. And while it does mention content – “living plants and animals” – more importantly it establishes an approach – presenting them as “true treasures.”)

“Everything changes, all the time, at speeds too fast or too slow for us to perceive.” (This message is much more content-focused, but again it boils down a lot of complicated information to a single nugget.)

“Philippine coral reefs support an amazing abundance of life and anchor a delicate network of dependencies between animals, habitats and humans.” (This is a pretty bad main message. I can say that because I wrote it. It is much too long and complicated, and tries to cover too much. And the resulting exhibit was a bit of a
mess. But, even at that, it was helpful in defining what did and did not belong in the exhibit.)

“What is it about dogs that makes us love them so?” (Main messages are rarely questions. But this one works, because it links so powerfully to the visitors’ interests.)

Like poetry, every word matters. You are condensing the entire exhibit to a single sentence, so every word will have important ramifications. In the Philippines example, we had great debates over whether it was a “delicate network,” a “fragile network,” an “intricate network,” etc. Each of those means something slightly different. Choosing the one that fit best was important.

Why? What does a Main Message do for you?

First and foremost, it serves the visitor. On any given topic, you could say a million things. However, visitors – who, remember, are non-experts, walking through at random, and only giving you 15 – 20 minutes – won’t pick up very much. You must have a single, clear message, and keep repeating it in a variety of different ways, if you hope to communicate it to your audience.

Internally, a Main Message clarifies for you and for everyone else on the exhibit team exactly what this project is about. It creates buy-in on your team. Everyone will have different ideas what the exhibit should be about. By having everyone participate in creating the Main Message, the entire team comes to a common understanding of the exhibit goals.

A Main Message also establishes your attitude, the approach you will take to you topic. For example, in the Philippines, some felt that an “intricate” network put too much emphasis on how complicated and detailed it was; and “fragile” network sounded like it was decrepit and about to fall apart.

But perhaps most important, a Main Message is also a tremendous editing device. It tells you what to do, but also what NOT to do. Again, using the Philippines as an example, there were some on the exhibit team who wanted to include information on the evolution of coral and its relatives. But that did not fit into the ecological story we needed to tell. So that was not included. Others wants a big section on coral anatomy and physiology. That did work, but only as it related to ecology. (As an animal, coral eats; here’s how
that connects it to the network. As an animal, coral grows; here’s how that connects it to the network.)

The whole exhibit is reflected in your Main Message:

- **Purpose** – WHY do we want to do this exhibit? (to convey this message)
- **Audience** – WHO are we doing it for? (reflected in the language you choose)
- **Subject** – WHAT do we want to say to visitors? (often stated fairly directly)
- **Strategy** – HOW are we going to say it? (reflected in the “attitude” of the Message: is it fun? Serious? Emotive?)

How to write a main message:

Ask yourself / your team: What is the single most important idea you want people to get in your exhibit?

Then, write that idea down in a single, complete sentence of interest to your visitors. **REMEMBER** – the visitor less interested in fact than affect. They do not come to the museum to learn any specific facts, but rather to have a real experience. “Exhibit” is a verb meaning to show, not to tell.

**<WORKSHOP>**

At this point, the workshop participants did two exercises in writing a Main Message.

First, the entire group together brainstormed a Main Message for a fictional exhibit on Halloween. We brainstormed for a few minutes on the various topics we might want to include: candy, trick-or-treats, costumes, horror movies, the supernatural / spirit world, witches, magic, monsters, harvest festivals, pumpkins / jack o’lanterns, Mexico’s Day of the Dead celebrations, teen vandalism, economics (Americans spend more on Halloween than any other holiday except for Christmas), etc.

Then, we started coming up with sentences to describe the exhibit. Unfortunately, I didn’t write down all of the ideas, but they came up with things like:

- “Halloween has its roots in many European traditions.”
- “Halloween is one way American culture deals with death.”
- “Halloween is a uniquely American tradition.”
Each of these Main Messages describes a different exhibit. The first Message would be for an historical exhibit – tracing the roots of the holiday, but probably not spending a lot of time on the way we celebrate it today. The third message is the opposite – it would focus strongly on the modern holiday, but spend little if any time talking about its roots. The middle message focuses on one aspect – death – and thus would not touch on unrelated topics like candy and economics.

All of these message are good, and any could be used to create a fine exhibit. But each exhibit would be very different. Visitors would learn different things in each. That’s OK. It’s not possible for someone to learn every last detail about Halloween, or any topic, in a single 20-minute experience. You have to choose a theme and stick with it.

Next, the workshop participants split into groups. They were given the following hypothetical situation:

You work for a local historical society. Joe Smith, a member of your community left home as a young man and went to Hollywood. There, he became stage manager for a famous television show. During his career, he collected all kinds of memorabilia: props, costumes, scripts, photos, equipment, etc. When he retired, he returned to his home town and donated his collection to the historical society. It is now your job to develop an exhibit around this collection.

The groups were told to first choose a TV show, and then come up with a Main Message. Again, I didn’t save the Messages, but they were something like this:

Group 1 chose the TV show Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood. Their Message was something like “Our neighbor helped create America’s neighborhood.” This message puts equal weight on the man and on his work, and ties it into a larger story.

Group 2 chose the various Charlie Brown TV specials. Their message was something like “Joe Smith and Charles Schultz created an American icon.” Here, the emphasis is less on the man, and much more on the impact the TV show had on American culture.

Group 3 chose Gilligan’s Island. Their message was something like “Gilligan’s Island shows what it takes to be a true TV survivor.” This message completely ignores the man, and doesn’t even talk about his work very much. Instead, it focuses almost completely on
the impact the show had on American culture.

Again, these are all perfectly good ideas and approaches. The point is, given a particular collection, you can go in a lot of different directions with your exhibit. In order to create a coherent exhibit experience for your visitors, you need to pick ONE direction, at the beginning, and stick to it.

</WORKSHOP>

**Content outline**

Once you have a Main Message, you start fleshing it out with supporting messages. The exhibit team starts brainstorming ideas to include in the exhibit. Not experiences, not components, not objects component, or objects – we’re not there yet. Instead, focus on ideas that you want to get across.

(Now, in reality, things aren’t this clear-cut. You will of course have some content ideas even during the Main Message stage. There may be important objects you absolutely have to put in the exhibit. That’s fine. But at this point, you really want to focus, as much as possible, on WHAT you want the exhibit to say, and don’t worry yet about HOW you’re going to say it.)

If you’ve done your job well, you’ll have tons of content ideas. So the next step is to rank them:

- **Primary message**: the exhibit must communicate this to visitors.
- **Secondary message**: you should communicate this to your visitors.
- **Tertiary message**: it would be nice to communicate this to visitors.

Each content idea is weighed against the Main Message. How well does it fit? How well does it support the Main Message? A content idea that fits the Main Message well might be Primary or Secondary; an idea that doesn’t fit very well would be Tertiary, or perhaps just rejected.

How many ideas should you have in each category?

- Primary: just a few. Half-a-dozen may be too many.
- Secondary: depends on how many primaries you have. You should probably have no more than three times as many secondary messages as primary messages.
- Tertiary: the sky’s the limit – for now. Many of these will get weeded out later in
Why are we doing this? Like everything, it’s for the visitor. An exhibit is not a book you can pore over, focus on, return to, re-read. An exhibit is an experience – non-verbal, non-linear, visual, and about 15 minutes long. The more organized your exhibit is, the more likely it is that visitors will learn something while there.

Creating a content outline also helps the team. It forces you to have the hard discussions about what’s in the exhibit and what’s out. The team will evolve a clearer vision. And, because you came to this point together, through a process in which everyone participates, and everyone can propose ideas, there is a greater buy-in, an acceptance of the direction and vision for the exhibit.

<WORKSHOP>

Again, the workshop participants went through two exercises. First, as one large group, we brainstormed ideas for the Halloween exhibit. We had decided on the Main Message “Halloween is a uniquely American holiday.” Then, as we brainstormed content ideas, we weighed each one against the Main Message.

Some ideas we rejected outright. When someone mentioned the roots of Halloween in pagan Europe, or the connection to Day of the Dead, we had to say no: that’s not “uniquely American.”

Again, I neglected to save all the notes (I didn’t think anyone would be interested in them afterwards). But I seem to recall we had a cluster of ideas around food and candy, another cluster around parties and costumes, and a third around death, horror, and the supernatural. So, our exhibit outline began to take shape, and looked something like this:

MAIN MESSAGE: Halloween is a uniquely American holiday.

Primary Message: Some traditions tie us to our agricultural past
  Secondary ideas: Candy
                  Pumpkins
                  Bobbing for apples / hayrides

Primary Message: Some traditions help us escape our identities
  Secondary ideas: costumes
                  Parties
Playing tricks / teen vandalism

Primary Message: Some Halloween traditions let us think about death
Secondary ideas: horror movies
Spooks and spirits

The group then broke into their teams and brainstormed ideas for their TV exhibits. Each team was given a pile of index cards. Each team members then wrote down at least five content ideas, one on each card. The teams then discussed the ideas – rejecting some, elevating others in importance. Finally, they arranged the cards into piles, according to common themes.

Again, I had no idea anybody would want this later, so I didn’t save any of it. (Though I may have some of the note cards at home.) So, this is partly memory and partly made up

Charlie Brown

Main Message: “Joe Smith and Charles Schultz created an American icon.”
Primary message: Charles Schultz created American icon in Peanuts
Primary message: Joe Smith helped bring the Peanuts characters to life in the TV specials

Mr. Rogers

Main Message: “Our neighbor helped create America’s neighborhood.”
Primary message: Joe Smith grew up in our neighborhood
Primary message: Creating a TV show is a lot of work
Primary message: The neighborhood created on the show became America’s neighborhood.

Gilligan’s Island

Main Message: “Gilligan’s Island shows what it takes to be a true TV survivor.”
Primary message: The characters of the show are American archetypes
Primary message: The interactions on the show reflected the ideas and values of the audience
Primary message: The show was and remains successful because it speaks to human nature.

Again, you could have come up with different content ideas and arranged them in different ways. (I seem to recall that the Charlie Brown group had a long discussion over
different ways to shuffle their cards.) The most important thing is to have an organization that speaks to visitors. As much as possible, you of course want that organization to reflect the ideas you’re trying to communicate.

</WORKSHOP>

(OK, at this point we were running out of time. I kind of hurried through this last part. However, a few weeks later, I was giving another presentation, and someone asked me to elaborate on this. So, using Halloween as an exercise, I wrote a fairly lengthy explanation, which is appended at the end.)

**Storyline**

Once we have our Main Message and Content Outline, we next go to work on the Storyline. When we talk about “story” in an exhibit, we mean “the flow of information.” It doesn’t necessarily mean characters, plot, setting, dramatic tension, etc., though those things can be present. However, since an exhibit is experienced in a non-linear fashion, these can be difficult to achieve. So “story” is used more broadly to mean how you arrange information in a context.

There are three points to bear in mind:

- Nothing exists out of context. We live our lives in space and time; we acquire info the same way; and we experience exhibits this way as well.
- Humans learn by adding new knowledge on top of existing knowledge.
- Our brain is wired to seek pattern, cause-and-effect, and connection.

Because of this, stories are some of the most powerful, effective means of communication. Think of the oldest stories in Western culture: the ancient myths, the fables of Aesop, the parables of Christ. Each of these teaches a powerful, important message. We remember them, because they put that message in a real-life context we can relate to and understand. Simply presenting raw information in abstract terms would not be nearly as effective – we have nothing to grab on to, nothing to relate it to our lives.

Even saying and adages work because they speak to us in relevant, physical terms. “A penny saved is a penny earned” feels real, because we all know what a penny is. “Money you save by not spending it is equivalent to income” is less effective – it’s too abstract.
There are five basic ways you can organize information:
  Chronological
  Geographical
  Alphabetical
  Categorical
  Magnitude

You can use whatever organization makes sense for your message AND your audience.

I like to use an example from sports. Let’s say you are creating an exhibit for the New York Yankees, honoring all their great players. You could display them in chronological order (by the year they joined the team, or by decades). You could present them in alphabetical order. You could go position-by-position (which is a type of Geographical organization). You could arrange it by number of games played (which is organization by size). You could arrange it by the ethnic backgrounds of the players – the Germans, the Italians, the blacks, etc. This would be categorical.

Each of these organizations tells a slightly different story. For this particular example:

- The chronological organization (year-by-year) puts the players in the context of baseball history. It forces us to compare, for example, baseball during Babe Ruth’s day (1920s and 1930s) vs. baseball in Mickey Mantle’s day (1950s and 1960s).
- On the other hand, the organization by size (number of games played) removes the players from the context of baseball history. Players from different decades get mixed together. This organization would emphasize each player’s contribution to the Yankees.
- The geographical organization (position-by-position) would force us to compare famous catchers vs. famous pitchers vs. famous outfielders, etc., and asks us what does it take to be a star at each of these different positions?
- The categorical organization (in my example arranged by ethnic background, though certainly other categories are possible) removes the focus from baseball and instead focuses on the immigrant and ethnic experiences of different groups.
- Finally, the alphabetical organization puts the emphasis squarely on the individual players. They are not placed in the context of history, or the context of the game, or the context of society, or any context at all. Each player now stands by himself.

Again, these are all perfectly fine ways to organize your information. The questions you
must ask yourself are:

What will my visitors respond to? Die-hard baseball fans who know all the players and know the context would probably want an alphabetical arrangement, so they can find their heroes quickly. Casual fans who don’t know as much about baseball would probably might prefer a little context – the history of baseball, or the positions. And non-fans might respond to the broader, social context.

Second, what story do I want to tell? What is my Main Message? If your Message is “The Yankees have dominated baseball for 85,” then obviously an historical organization would work the best. If your message is “The Yankees have had a lot of great players,” then the alphabetical, or position-by-position, would be better options.

REMEMBER: we are telling a STORY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stories DON’T:</th>
<th>Stories DO:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dump 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>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

REMEMBER:
An exhibit is not about its content;
   It’s not about the objects;
   It’s about the visitor.

People remember stories. People respond to context. People will make connections, if they are there to be made. Story – the way you organize information – helps get your message across to the visitor.

**Addendum**

(A couple weeks after the workshop in Grand Rapids, I gave a similar presentation to a museum studies class at JFK University in California. Afterwards, a couple of people asked me to elaborate on “story.” Remembering the Michigan workshop, I pulled out the fictional Halloween exhibit and gave some examples based on that. Here’s what I sent them – it overlaps a bit with the Yankee example, but repetition can reinforce a point.)
“Story” refers to the gallery as a whole, how pieces are laid out throughout the entire exhibit. It only applies to interpretive exhibits – those that have a message the museum is trying to communicate. Not all exhibits are interpretive: art museums are famous (notorious?) for deliberately not interpreting their works, but rather “letting the art speak for itself.” I have some serious philosophical problems with this approach, but be that as it may. If your exhibit is trying to convey information, then it helps to have that information organized. “Story” is just another word for “organization.”

The second big point is: the human brain is a pattern-seeking machine. It evolved to make sense (interpret) the physical environment, as well as the temporal sequence of events (story). In an exhibit, designers and developers control both of these. So, reverse-engineer it. Consider the visitor: after having physically experienced our exhibit space, after having spent their time there, the visitor will try to make sense out of it. They will construct a story for themselves. Given that there is certain information we want to get across – the “moral” we hope they draw from our story – how best to organize the info so they are most likely to reach that conclusion?

But now we run up against the third big point: the limitations of medium. The visitor is in control of their experience. We cannot guarantee they will experience every piece, nor that they will experience pieces in a specific order. (In a large gallery with several sections or rooms, we have a bit more control: we can design things so that visitors must pass through room 1 before they enter room 2. Well, usually we can – there will always be folks going against the flow, doubling back, skipping ahead, etc. Within any room, the visitor is free to create their own experience – though design can make certain things more prominent, and thus more likely to be seen, and seen first.)

Thus, the hologram metaphor: every piece of the exhibit must reflect the main message in some way, so that no matter what random sub-set of components a visitor sees, they should still be able to draw the desired conclusion.

So, how do we organize those rooms or sections? As I mentioned in my talk, there are basically five ways to organize information:

- Chronologically
- Spatially
- Categorically
- Sequentially
- Order of magnitude
Let us take one example (which I happened to use at a workshop in October). Let’s suppose we are developing an exhibit for a cultural museum with the main message: “Halloween is a uniquely American holiday.” You can well imagine there would be a wealth of information we might want to convey: the roots of Halloween as a harvest festival; the “death” of nature in the Fall leading to concerns with human death and the spirit world; the overly of modern religion (All Saint’s Day, Dia de los Muertos); fear as entertainment; candy; costumes; jack-o-lanterns; various types of parties; etc. etc.

Remember: visitors are walking through the exhibit. They are walking through our information. In broad outline terms, what would be the best order for them to experience our information, in order to make sense out of it – the sense we hope they will make?

Given our message, how might we organize all this information chronologically?

- There’s the “sweep of history,” with Room 1 addressing ancient Druids; room 2 Catholic Ireland; and room 3 contemporary America. (Of course, this kind of gets away from the notion of “uniquely American Holiday.”)

- Focusing on American history, we might look at Halloween customs and traditions over time. Room 1 might be circa 1850; room 2 might be 1900; room 3 could be 1950; room 4 could be 2000. (Research would inform us as to which dates are actually relevant to the story.)

- Another chronological approach might be to walk through the month of October. What are people doing October 1 (planning for the event)? October 15 (buying or making a costume, planning a party)? October 25 (buying and carving a pumpkin, stocking up on candy)? October 31 (the day itself)?

How might we organize the information spatially?

- Perhaps each room of the exhibit talks about Halloween customs in different parts of the country. This approach would only work if there really are significant differences.

- Or, perhaps we organize the exhibit as a walk down a street: there’s a cemetery (American view of death); a farmer’s market (harvest ritual); movie theater (fear as entertainment); costume shop; candy shop; house distributing candy; haunted
house; house throwing a party; etc.

How might the information be organized categorically?

- Well, first you would pick your categories. Perhaps death, harvest, entertainment, commercialism, costumes & candy, religion. Every exhibit team is going to come up with a different set of categories. (I just combined costumes and candy. Another team might separate them, but combine “death” and “religion.”) Then, what order do you want them? Do you want to lead with the harvest info, since that’s where the holiday came from? Do you want to lead with commercialism, the hook to modern America? Do you want to lead with costumes & candy, since that will be most familiar? You can create whatever categories you want, and order them to create the desired effect.

How would the exhibit look if it were organized sequentially?

“Sequentially” means either alphabetically or numerically.

- Alphabetical: Halloween A to Z. Can you think of 26 components, and give each one a title beginning with a different letter of the alphabet? I suspect “Halloween” may be too narrow a topic for this approach.

- Numerical: some sort of “Top Ten” countdown or some such. I can’t think off-hand of any numerical sequence related to Halloween (“The Twelve Days of Christmas” is a different matter.) So again, this might not work.

Finally, how might the exhibit look if organized by order of magnitude?

- Again, I can’t think of any organizing principle for Halloween that can be organized by size. If you were doing “Countries of the World,” you could organize by land area or population. But it doesn’t seem to apply here.

As you can see, some of these work pretty well, some less-well, and some are complete non-starters. In general, I would think that pretty much ANY exhibit content can be organized Categorically. (Whether that is the best possible organization, we will consider in a moment.) Many, perhaps most, exhibits can be organized chronologically or spatially. (Space can mean more than countries or geographic entities. It can be the
order of the planets; the rooms of a house; a trip down the alimentary canal; etc.) But, as
we saw, some chronological organizations worked better for this main message than
others. Ditto for some spatial organizations.

Each story, each organizing principle, will have a different effect. Each will have a
different affect. Each leads to a slightly different “moral.” You choose the best one
based on your dramatization, proposition, and receiver.

First, think of the receiver. Who will be using this exhibit? How are they likely to make
sense out of it? How are they likely to apply the knowledge they already have to the
content of your exhibit?

If you are building an exhibit for children, you probably won’t be terribly successful with
historical or categorical approaches. They generally don’t think of the world in those
terms. Children will create a story that makes sense to them (trick-or-treating for younger
ones; fear and scariness for older). Adults on the other hand have mental capacity for
more abstract stories; history or category might work just fine for them. If you audience
is drawn from a city that has a particular Halloween ritual, or deep agricultural roots, or a
large ethnic population related to the story, you might want to anchor the exhibit on that,
which will influence your choice. (You might need to tweak your main message a bit to
accommodate.)

Next, the proposition: what is it, exactly, you want to say? If you want the moral of the
story to be something like “Americans have commercialized Halloween,” then some of
these organizational schemes will work better than others. Chronology is probably weak
(you’re talking about the current state of Halloween, not it’s past. And unlike, say,
Christmas, the lead-in to the holiday is not so elaborate and ritualized that a count-down
through the month would apply.). Categorical is iffy (there’s really only one category:
commercialization). But spatial (a walk through a commercialized American holiday) or
sequential (a Top 10 commercialized items) might work. On the other hand, if you want
the moral to be “Americans avoid dealing with death; Halloween is our one day to
confront it,” then perhaps a history of dealing with death would work, or categories of
death (death as a natural process; belief in spirits; organized religion; fear as
entertainment) might suit you better.

Finally, how do you wish to dramatize the information, bring it to life? This often has the
least impact on story, unless there is some major constraint. (At the Shedd Aquarium, we
had to build an exhibit around a large shark tank of fixed dimensions.) Perhaps your
institution insists on object-based exhibits. Any organization could work, but strengths and gaps in collection will influence what you come up with. Perhaps you have a mandate to create interactive exhibits. This subject doesn’t seem to lend itself to that. Maybe with more thought we could come up with something, or maybe we have to change the exhibit to fit that directive. Perhaps you want to create immersive exhibits. Those pretty much require a spatially-based story. Perhaps you want to use a lot of high-tech media. That’s fine, but you may then find it difficult to use them in an historical setting. And perhaps your institution is very content-driven. In which case, you’ll find experts proposing categories right and left, and your job becomes finding the ones that make sense to visitors.

So, in summary:

Story is just how you organize the exhibit info. And you organize in the way in which the visitor is most likely to construct a meaning that resonates with your intended interpretation.