No Cure For Entropy:
Maintaining exhibit integrity over time

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Visitors expect a lot of things from a museum: convenient parking, clean restrooms, a useable map or directory. But these are not what attracts the visitor to our doors. Our audience comes seeking Truth, with a very capital "T." Oh, they may be motivated more by a desire for entertainment than for enlightenment, and many have no higher purpose in dropping by than simply killing an afternoon. Nevertheless, once you put the word "Museum" above your door, the people coming in will expect you to deal in the eternal verities -- whether in art, science, nature, or culture.

Funny thing about Truth in these latter, final days: it has proven to be an enormously malleable commodity. Everything we know is wrong. New discoveries indicate that dinosaurs were warm-blooded, social creatures. New interpretations have lifted Monet's late canvasses from the obscurity of dotage to justified acclaim. New sensitivities encourage us to refrain from referring to less-familiar cultures as "primitive" or "savage." Meanwhile our exhibits sit, frozen in time, growing more obsolete with each passing day.

So the challenge we in the Truth biz face is figuring out what to do when the Truth changes -- not "if," but "when." Do we admit our mistake and make corrections, or steadfastly defend the status-quo and knowingly feed our audience misinformation? From a Visitor Services standpoint there can be no debate: the public comes to us expecting accurate information, and that's precisely what we're going to give them. Hey, you knew the job was dangerous when you took it. Besides, being out-of-step with the times is precisely what gives so many of our museums the "dry and dusty" image we try so hard to combat.

Of course, full-scale renovations are not always practical. For one thing, they require time, effort, and money, all of which are in short supply. Furthermore, exhibits do not go out-of-date all at once. There may be one glaring problem in a display which is otherwise just fine. How do you address individual problems quickly, easily, and above all cheaply?

Several institutions have established "Fix-Up" programs to handle these sorts of issues. One person, or a small team, is empowered to identify and rectify content decay
They become, in effect, a mini Exhibit Development Project, handling everything from research and writing to design, production, and installation. (Since we're talking mainly about writing new labels this sounds a lot more impressive than it actually is; but as Andrew Agassi might be paid to say, "buzz words are everything.")

These efforts focus on maintaining exhibit content, rather than physical appearance. Of course, worn-out or graffiti-ravaged exhibits; the long, ponderous labels that no one ever reads or other similar issues can also be addressed by the same team, using the same quick-and-cheap repair process.

There are two ways to establish a Fix-Up program: overtly and covertly, the latter being greatly preferred. To set up a covert operation, seek out one person reasonably high up in your institution's administrative structure: vice-president, director, trustee, whatever works for you. Convince them that Fix-Up is necessary to keep the museum from embarrassing itself. Once you have their support, then just do it. Make the necessary changes on your own. And if anyone should notice or complain (and trust me, they will), refer them to The Boss. Let them take the heat; that's what bosses are for.

The American Museum of Natural History uses this model in its "Dirty Dozen" program. Twelve staff members from assorted departments meet in secret and make their changes under cover of darkness. They operate as a guerilla exhibit maintenance program; one that can move quickly, travel lightly, and offer no target to the enemy. Their identities are known only by one associate director, who takes responsibility for everything they do. And they've done quite a bit in the last few years with their "dilemma label" program, pointing out how both knowledge and attitudes have changed in the years since their exhibits were first installed.

Who should be on your team? It depends on your institution. If you're in a small museum, it could be the entire staff. If you find yourself in the bowels of a massive bureaucracy, you may be better off going it alone -- the smallest ship makes the fewest waves. But whatever your situation, you should seek out allies and/or silent partners in Design, Production, Visitor Services, and Curatorial (or whoever will help you with content and development). What you need are people who, if they can't do the job themselves, will tell you what to do and then get out of your way. All nay-sayers, obstructionists, or territorial-types should be given a Tootsie Roll and sent back to their cubicles, where they can be safely ignored.

The most important members of your team will be your volunteers - the life's blood of any under-funded project (and believe me, you will be underfunded). Many institutions have an unfortunate tunnelvision regarding interns and volunteers, assigning them to just a few roles, usually in Education. But there are people out there with all
kinds of talents you can use in writing, designing, creating. And if anyone raises an eyebrow at letting "mere" volunteers develop exhibits, smile sweetly and remind them that the gosh-awful, embarrassing exhibits you are repairing were created by paid staff. (Unless of course the paid staff in question are still around, in which case you might want to be more diplomatic. I wouldn't, but you might.)

Alternately, you can try to run an overt operation, working openly with all affected departments in your museum. This system, used at the Field Museum in Chicago, is far less effective. Y'see, the other departments don't want to hear from you; you're just giving them more work. And they don't want you to do it yourself; you're stepping on their turf.

Systems such as these fall subject to The Law of the Conservation of Adjectives (Newton, *Principia Esoterica*, 1686). This holds that an exhibit can be done quickly, cheaply, or well, but only two of the three. If you want it good and quick, then you'll have to pay for a lot of extra help to meet your deadlines. And we all know how much extra money there is floating around these days. Alternately, if you want it good and cheap, then you'll have to be willing to languish at the bottom of the priority list until somebody has some free time. But this is antithetical to the purpose of Fix-Up, which is to fix a problem as soon as it is noticed so your customers aren't paying good money for bad information.

That leaves quick and cheap, which means you'll have to cut corners and sacrifice some quality. Your motto should be "Simple and right beats beautiful and wrong." This will make you extremely popular with designers, as well as with any self-appointed guardians of the institutional "image." This is where it really helps to have the committed support of your boss. Particularly a boss whose motto is "A corner office beats a cubicle, and a Smith & Wesson beats four aces."

OK, we've established the moral imperative for a Fix-Up program. Now, how do we implement it? It's a 5-point plan I like to call:

**The Dollar-Ninety-Eight Exhibit Maintenance Program**

1) Find out what needs to be fixed. This is easy enough; take a walk through the exhibits and keep your eyes open (you remember the exhibits; the stuff on the other side of the Administrative Offices?). Talk to the staff; everyone probably has a list of their favorite gaffes. Listen to your visitors; they're a pretty observant bunch. We get most of our ideas from their comments.

2) Prioritize. Not all problems are equally dire. Misspelling
Lawrencium on the periodic table is not a major blunder. Stating that it is the heaviest element known, is.

3) Development. Figure out what needs to be done to fix this problem. 90% of the time, all it takes is adding or changing a label. However, you may occasionally find an error inherent in the exhibit itself -- the map in your Asian hall still shows the Soviet Union, doesn't it? (Don't feel bad; until last year, ours still showed Persia.) Do you buy a new map? Have one made? Put up an apology label that says "Yeah, we know it's wrong, sorry"? Push to have the entire hall renovated? The line between quick-and-easy Fix-Ups and full-scale renovations is fuzzier than one might expect. Your institution will have to decide when an exhibit needs a band-aid, and when it needs corrective surgery.

4) Write the label. This is easy enough. Find someone who can write reasonably coherent English sentences, point them in the direction of a library, and tell them to go to it. I find interns and student volunteers work well: they are young, flexible, energetic, and often have these utterly useless English degrees which they are dying to use. Give them whatever training or guidelines are used in your institution for producing label copy, and send them off.

5) Production. The high priests of design (do you get the feeling that this is where I have the most problems?) would have us believe that this is a mysterious, intricate, and important ritual, full of subtleties that only the initiated can understand. So is phrenology. The truth is, all you need are the following tools and you could -- dare I say it? -- rule the world:

- a word processor, laser-jet printer, and a scalable-fonts program to interface between them;
- some basic graphic arts tools, like a T-square, ruler, cutting mat, utility knife, paper cutter;
- some basic graphic arts supplies: lightly-colored 8 1/2 x 11 bond paper to print your labels (buff, powder blue, whatever matches your hall); matt board to mount them on (also available in colors, as well as black and white); spray mount or twintack to mount them with;
- and, the two most vital supplies: sheets of clear laminating plastic to protect your labels from thousands of tiny fingers; and a roll of double-sided tape to stick them up on the wall (the T-square also comes in handy here for making them level).

You should already have most of this stuff lying around. If not, it's easily and
inexpensively available at most good art supply stores.

Set your labels in a serif typeface; any of the several hundred versions of Roman will do nicely. Make the headlines 30-point or 24-point bold; make the body copy 24-point or 18-point regular. If you need to emphasize a word, use italics rather than boldface or underline. Make your margins at least 3/4" on all sides, a full inch if you can. Single-spacing is fine, but if your word-processor allows it, set the line spacing to 1.1 or 1.2 for greater readability. Set the page to flush left, ragged right. Do not justify; it looks awful.

Print on the 8 1/2 x 11 colored paper. If necessary, trim away excess blank space. Cut out a piece of matt board of the same dimension, and mount one to the other. (Here you'll need someone with graphics experience to show you how.) If the label will be outside of an exhibit case, cover with a sheet of laminating plastic. Do not trim it flush; rather, leave about an inch on all sides and fold it over onto the back. This will protect it from being peeled. Put a piece of double-stick in each corner and slap it up. Sit down and congratulate yourself. You have just improved the visitor experience.

Now for the stirring finale. Every museum needs a Fix-Up project. Your museum needs a Fix-Up project. If not today, then tomorrow: when a Navaho visitor mentions that his people call themselves the *Dene*; when a student asks why your exhibit on the solar system shows Pluto with no moon; when someone mentions that Georgia O'Keefe can no longer be considered, as your label states, "one of America's greatest living artists." Though we no longer pretend to offer immutable "Truth," our visitors do expect us to show them what knowledge or understanding our various disciplines have to offer. Assuring they get that is the bare minimum visitor service we must provide.