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Excellence in Exhibition
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Over the last couple of years, I’ve been involved in two projects that considered the topic of excellence in exhibition. One was fairly theoretical; the other more practical. The theoretical project was helping draw up the part of NAME’s Strategic Plan that dealt with Excellence in Exhibition. The more practical project was working with Beverly Serrell and a group of Chicago exhibit professionals in devising a tool for judging excellence in exhibits.

I won’t be describing these in too much detail; rather, I propose to hit the highlights and draw connections to the NIP. Both of these are described in detail in the Spring issue of NAME’s professional journal, the Exhibitionist, along with several other articles on various aspects of exhibit excellence. You should all have copies; I’ll leave you to read them on your own.

At the end of my talk I’ll discuss ways for you to participate in both of these projects, if you are so inclined. And I will certainly be available to answer any questions you may have.

NAME STRATEGIC PLANNING

The Excellence in Exhibition section of NAME’s Strategic Plan attempts to answer four questions:

- What is Excellence?
- What are the Obstacles preventing Excellence?
- What are the current Opportunities for Excellence?
- What can NAME do to help?

A tall order. We took as our starting point the document “Standards for Museum Exhibition and Indicators of Excellence,” produced in 1997 by the Council of Standing Professional Committees of AAM. This document has received a varied reception. Some people who helped write it feel they have carved words into stone tablets, and are waiting for someone to carry them down from the mountaintop. Others, who sat on the very same committee, felt it was all a lot of hot air and would be just as happy to junk the whole thing. We at NAME took a middle ground. The SPC document covered a lot of areas like Conservation, Security, etc. which, while important, aren’t directly part of NAME’s emphasis on exhibit development, design, and fabrication. And when the SPC document does address those areas, it tends to be rather sketchy and skeletal – especially in the Indicators of Excellence.
So, the NAME Strategic Planning group took this document as a jumping-off point, and saw our task as elaborating on it, filling in the details that would be most meaningful to our members.

In **Defining Excellence**, we came up with a four-part grid, based on two dichotomies. The first was, what kind of excellence are we talking about?

- Excellence in Process (“best practices” – design, development, resource use, scheduling, budgeting, evaluation, etc.)

- Excellence in Product (actual visitor experience – what they see, think, do, feel. Specifically visitor-focused, not profession-focused).

We actually took a certain amount of heat for that, from folks who didn’t want to see their creative art sullied with such mundane concerns. We were adamant, however, that our creativity is not an end unto itself, but exists in service of the visitor. Therefore, Product Excellence MUST be defined in terms of what the visitor gets out of it, rather than in terms of what we put into it. And Process Excellence is judged in terms of how efficiently the process delivers an excellent product, as we have defined it.

(The Chicago Excellent Judges project actually took this as their starting point and went off in some very interesting directions. But let me wrap up NAME and then get back to that.)

Under each of these heading, we had the second dichotomy:

- Benchmarks of Competence (bare minimum – identify the right things to do, the right way to do things)

- Standards of Excellence (the truly transcendent – invent new ways to more completely fulfill our goals of visitor satisfaction).

All four quadrants of our chart need further discussion. At the strategic level, we felt it was more proper to simply define the issue, and not try to dictate a solution.
NIP’s Characteristics of Exemplary Interpretation addresses many of the same issues, but in a slightly different organization. NIP’s “Strategy and Content” seems most closely aligned with NAME’s “Process” column, while “Access and Delivery” line up with Product. In particular, a lot of the things the NIP promotes – “clear statement, effective planning, involve community, careful selection, relevance, multiple levels and points of entry” -- are part of good process / philosophy. But getting the profession as a whole to A) embrace these ideas and B) learn how to accomplish them are two enormous tasks.

On the other hand, NIP’s “Enabling Factors” seem to fall under NAME’s next category: Challenges and Obstacles.

**Challenges and Obstacles** we split into two categories:

- External Factors – things in the institutional environment which are pretty much beyond the control of the Exhibits Department; and

- Internal Factors – things which lie within the scope of the Exhibits Department and/or the individual professional, and which we can, with effort, change.

External Factors include:

- Institutional factors – many museum professionals just don’t understand exhibition, what it aims to do, how it works. This includes many Directors, Administrators, Managers – and not a few people in Exhibits! This leads to a lack of leadership, and a lack of support for the folks who do have an idea.

- Team structure: We recognize this as a necessity, given the complexity of the medium and the need for input and cooperation. But many practitioners feel that consensus, compromise, and personal dynamics all cramp individual creativity and style.

- Audience: it is bad business sense to view the customer as an “obstacle;” to blame the visitors for failing to understand or use our exhibit as we intended. But visitors do present a challenge in that they rarely complain. They tend to be accepting and uncritical of our work, and thus provide little incentive for us to improve. Back in Chicago, we call this “the Cubs syndrome.” The Cubs are a perennially bad baseball team. But because the fans are so loyal, the team owners see very little reason to spend the money it would take to improve the club.

Internal factors:

- Lack of experience, knowledge, training, critical thinking skills.
• Isolation from other exhibit professionals; limited opportunities to discuss work, see other work.

• Fear of failure (costly and public)

• Inherent difficulty of job

As I mentioned, NIP’s “Enabling Factors” overlap with NAME’s “Obstacles” – internal clarity, ongoing responsibility, having and stating goals, conducting cross-institutional discussions, using (not just conducting) evaluation – these things simply aren’t happening on a systematic, profession-wide basis. Added to some of the other things NAME came up with, and we have a fairly comprehensive list of the Obstacles which prevent us from achieving Excellence on any consistent basis.

For **Opportunities**, we looked out across the shifting landscape of the modern American museum practice, and tried to identify those areas where changes were taking place, changes the exhibit profession could take advantage of.

• Bottom-line focus: with shifting funding sources (and aren’t we entering the third decade of complaining about the drop of government funding?) we are in a new environment, one in which intellectual integrity, institutional identity and visitor experience – all exhibit-related concepts – are getting more attention. Even the much-decried trend of bringing Directors and Administrators in from the for-profit field can be seen as an opportunity – the chance to educate our new bosses about what we do.

• New exhibit content and themes provide new avenues for intellectual exercise and creativity.

• New technologies provide new ways to achieve exhibit goals. (But they are not goals in and of themselves – which is why we didn’t list them first)

• High degree of goodwill gives us freedom to experiment and occasionally fail.

I didn’t see much in the NIP documents that seemed to apply to taking advantage of opportunities – but then, NIP is not a strategic plan. I guess all this falls loosely under the rubric of “advance the mission”
Finally, the Strategic Plan asked What Can NAME do to help remove the obstacles and seize the opportunities? We had many, many ideas, but kept list purposefully short to enable us to focus on a few key areas, and leave the specifics to later discussions.

- Define Excellence in Exhibition (perhaps a NAME publication)
- Identify / reward excellent exhibits (travelogue, re-vamped awards)
- Promote and apply standards of excellence (accreditation, “site inspections,” ratings)
- Training (for students, newcomers, on-going training for established professionals)

This is a very broad roadmap for achieving the goals set out by the Strategic Plan – goals which, as we have seen, overlap to a great extent with those if the NIP. NIP’s Research Agenda and Institutional Self-Study, and its impact on the Accreditation program, embrace these concerns. Indeed, they recommend the SPC’s “research and articulate standards and best practices in their professional areas.” We see NAME’s Strategic Plan fitting very well under this project.

THE (MOST) EXCELLENT JUDGES

The second project on exhibit excellence I worked on actually grew out of the first. Hearing about the NAME proposal at a meeting of the Chicago Museum Exhibitors’ Group, Beverly Serrell was inspired by the notion of “standards.” She solicited a group of us to explore the question: if different museum professionals used the same set of standards to review the same group of exhibits, would their reviews agree?

To date, the variety of existing exhibit reviews have tended to fall at one of two extremes: totally subjective critiques or substantially objective evaluations. We were looking for a middle ground, an objective set of criteria which each reviewer could apply, informed by their own professional expertise. We labeled this “judging,” as opposed to critiquing, reviewing or evaluating, and we called ourselves The Excellent Judges.

As with NAME, we started with the SPC Standards document. However, we found that most of these were very inwardly-focused – things that are important to museum professionals, but not to our visitors. (Indeed, the same could be said about the NIP’s Characteristics of Exemplary Interpretation.) So we set about to create a set of standards based solely on the visitor experience. After extensive discussions, we finally coalesced around five criteria:

- Comfort
• Competence
• Engagement
• Meaning
• Satisfaction

Comfort covers a broad range of issues related to physical, as well as psychological, accessibility—everything from orientation and ambience to inclusion and attribution. Good comfort opens the doors to other positive experiences; lack of comfort prevents them.

Again, we see parallels to the NIP’s Characteristics of Exemplary Interpretation – an excellent exhibit has a point of view, reflects the community, has an inviting design.

Competence refers not to the exhibit makers’ abilities, but to the visitors’ sense of competence—their ability to access and understand the content. Visitors feel intellectually up to the experience—the exhibit is neither “above” them nor “beneath” them. Competence goes beyond accessibility to embrace issues such as vocabulary, density, reinforcement, and whether visitors simply “get” the exhibit.

The NIP does not seem to address this area at all. None of the 28 characteristics of exemplary interpretation – not even the Access/Delivery category – really cover this issue of creating an exhibit which the visitors will feel is within their grasp: neither too technical nor too simplistic. This feels like a serious oversight.

What are people doing? Engagement is largely an observable quality. In an excellent exhibit, you can see visitors making stops, using elements, reading labels, scrutinizing objects—and talking to others about what they see.

Again, NIP does not address actual visitor reaction to the exhibit. It does encourage “multiple levels and points of entry” and “inviting design” – things which often lead to engagement. But again, we see the emphasis on intention, rather than on results.

Beyond being engaged, visitors find or create personal meaning in the exhibit experience. The content is relevant, the presentation is inspirational, and visitors become involved in both immediate and long-lasting ways.

Here, we find significant overlap between the NIP and the EJs – issues like knowledge, careful selection, relevance, and clarity are important to both. One of the most important areas of overlap is Relevance. The NIP says exemplary interpretation engages in important issues, while one of the givens of the EJ project was that an excellent exhibit must be meaningful to lots of visitors. (The National Park Service drew a similar conclusion in their 1997 guidelines, stating
that interpretation must embrace universal human concerns.) You simply cannot have a fully excellent exhibit on a trivial topic.

Finally, an excellent exhibit is **satisfying**. Well, duh. If it’s good, visitors will feel fulfilled, recommend it to friends, even revisit. **Satisfaction** is the cumulative gestalt of the whole visit, influenced by factors that came before. It’s the lasting impression you walk away with.

I am a little surprised that NIP didn’t spend more time on these affective issues. So much of an exhibit’s impact falls in the emotional realm. On the other hand, these factors are not easily measured, which may be why NIP shied away.

A lot of the NIP standards are still internally-focused, and don’t really apply to the EJ standards. And, a lot of the EJ standards do not seem to be reflected in the NIP. As with the NAME Strategic Plan, it doesn’t seem to be a matter of “right vs. wrong,” but rather of different purposes and approaches. The EJs, taking a very narrow audience focus, can probably be forgiven for not incorporating all the NIP issues. But NIP, being broader, seems to be missing or glossing over some visitor experience issues which we feel are fairly important.

The Excellent Judges took these standards into the field and reviewed several exhibits around Chicago. Our sample size – both in the number of judges and the number of exhibits judged – is very small, and the tool was continually modified through the project. So we do not feel we have any useful results for specific exhibits. However, we do feel we have some very interesting results for the process.

The results ranged widely: a single exhibit might bring a rave response from one judge but leave another unimpressed. There were “extreme” scores that varied from the rest of the group. I was one of the judges most responsible for “extreme” scores – I tended to either love an exhibit or hate it. We believe that better training, exemplars, and a thorough understanding of the definitions of each criterion will lead to better “buy-in,” and will smooth out some of the overly-subjective ratings that lead to outlier scores.

On the other hand, if we accept that outliers are going to happen and instead look for clusters, we find there is some level of agreement. In 6 of the 8 exhibits viewed, a clear majority (2/3rds or more) of the judges had scores within a reasonable range, indicating they were all in the same ballpark.

We found that the most useful part of the process was not in the numbers, but in sharing our scores with each other and discussing the exhibit. The judging tool became a template, a list of agreed-upon topics and vocabulary to facilitate our understanding of the exhibits. It put us all on the same page. And while certainly people still held and expressed their personal and professional views of exhibition, we could no longer simply present subjective opinion as
inviolate and unassailable. It now had to be defended and explained within an objective framework.

Thus, the tool’s main value seems to be that it is both standardized, with the same issues being addressed by all judges; yet it is also flexible enough to allow for professional judgement – which is not always quantifiable on a checklist.

CALL FOR PARTICIPATION

So, having described these two projects on Excellence in Exhibition, I would like to offer you a chance to participate in the discussion. Both of these projects – NAME’s Strategic Plan and the EJ tool – are ongoing. We would welcome anyone with an interest to join us.

If you wish to participate in the NAME plan – help continue the discussion of these points, or develop strategies for fulfilling our goals – please contact me. I don’t believe we have a framework for implementation as yet, but one should be forthcoming.

If you would like to work with the Excellent Judges, forming discussion groups in your communities, we would be happy to help you get started and would love to hear your results. Not so much to learn which exhibits are good or bad, but more in hearing how the tool helps you assess and understand what is good or bad. Again, you can just contact me – you should all have my business card in your handouts. Just let me know how we can help you.

For more info on either of these projects, please see your issues of the Exhibitionist.

WRAP-UP

Exhibition is the defining characteristic of the Museum. I realize that is a controversial statement and not everyone is going to agree with it. So let me explain.

Collections, research, education: these are all extremely important – I would even say wonderful – things that museums do. But other institutions do them as well. You can have a collections program, research program, educational program in an institution without public displays. And these can be very good. But they’re not a museum. They are a classroom, a research institute, a private collection. Exhibits are what make something a museum.

All these activities are valid and important, and they all have to work well and work together for our institutions to thrive. And AAM programs have properly reflected their importance. We are
happy to see that, with the NIP, AAM is now recognizing, under the rubric of “Interpretation,” the fundamental and essential role of Exhibition in our profession. Thank you.