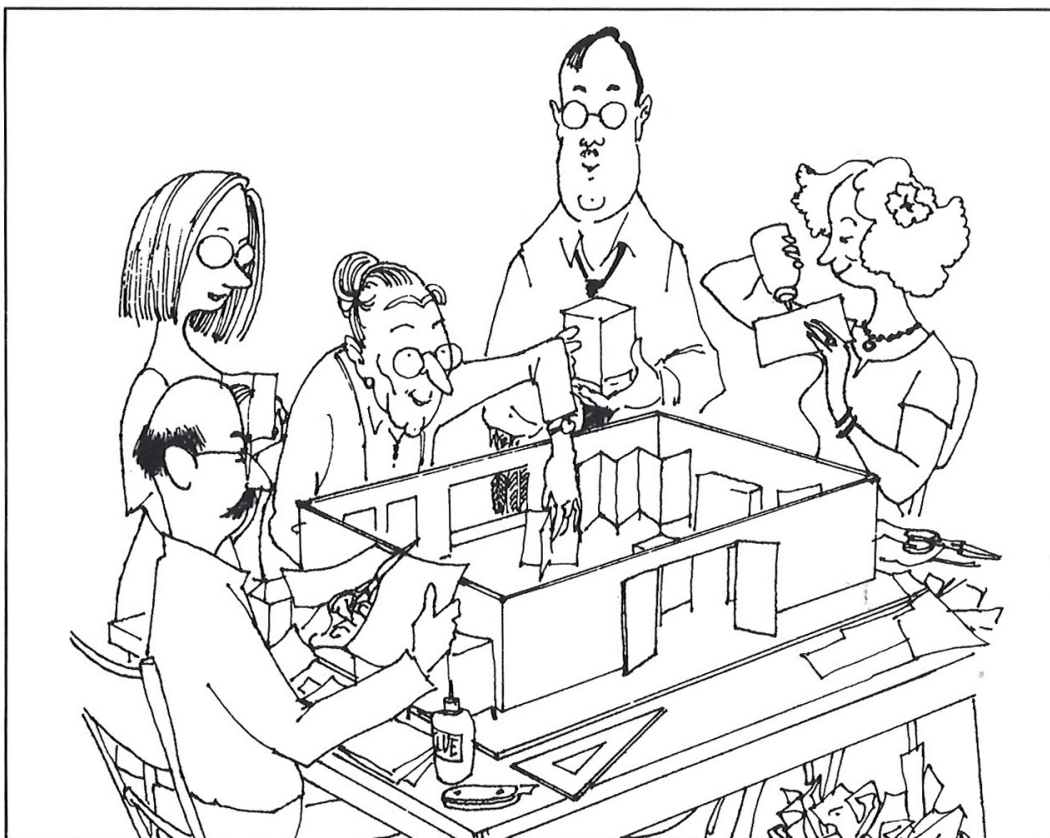


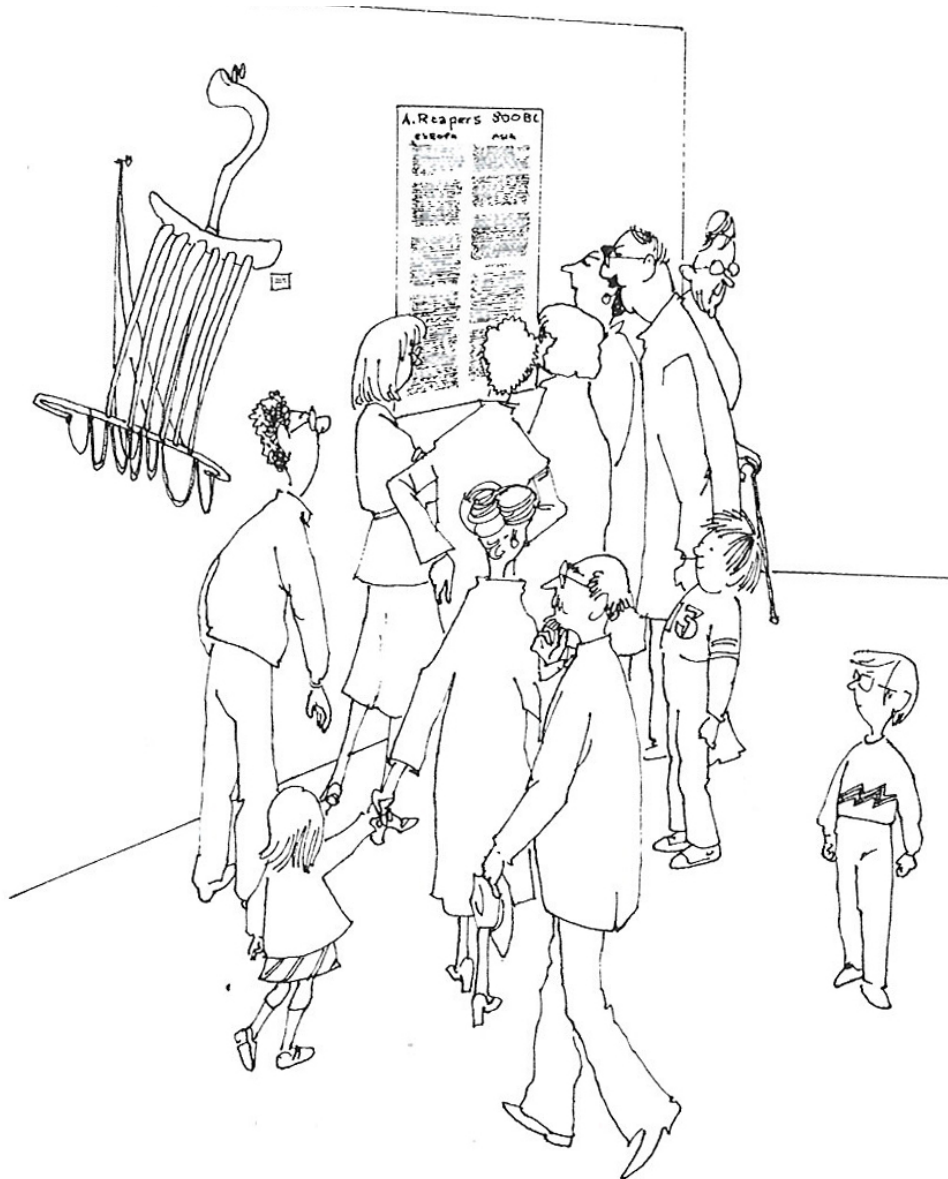
# MUSEUM on Main Street



## Exhibition Planning Guide

Museum on Main Street (MoMS) is a partnership between the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service and state humanities councils nationwide that serves small-town museums and their patrons. This innovative program provides one-of-a-kind access to Smithsonian exhibitions, scholarship, and humanities-based programming. Most importantly, MoMS provides community museums and libraries an opportunity to showcase their strengths and reinforce their meaningful contributions to small-town life. MoMS projects are specifically designed to meet the needs of small organizations.

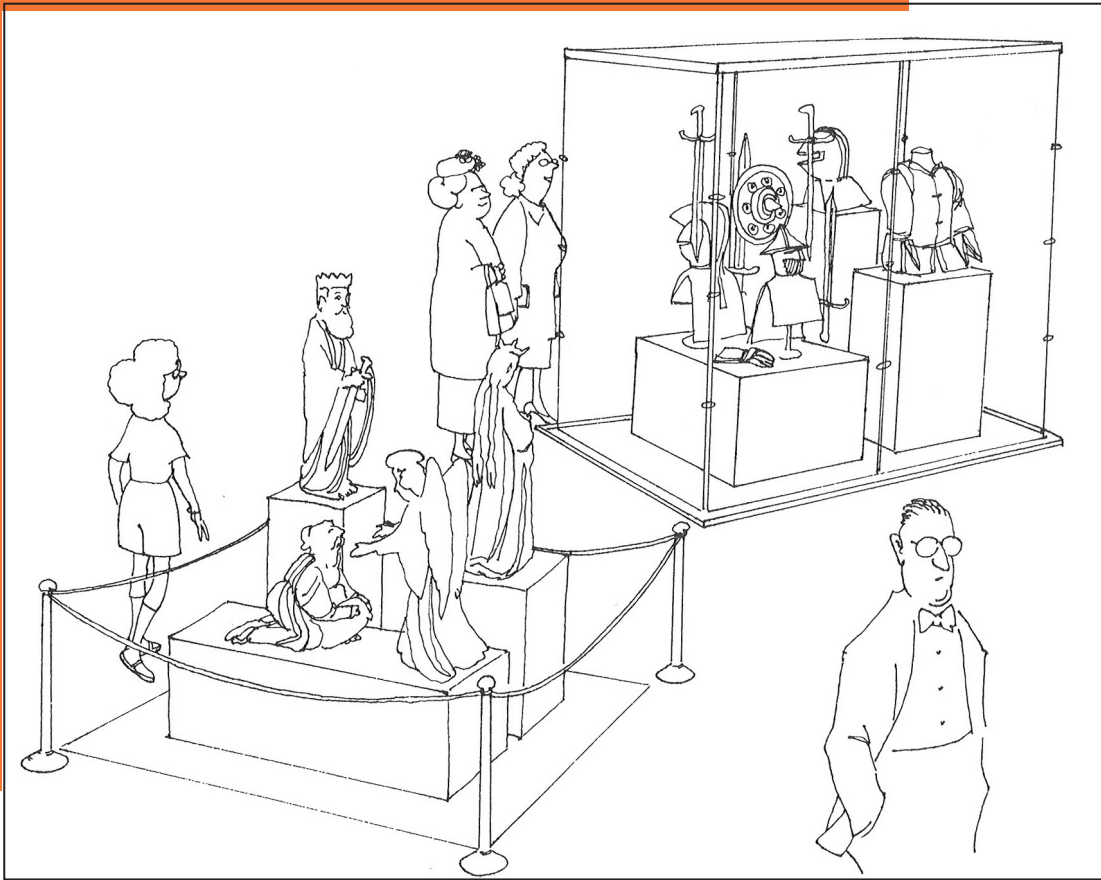
For information about other Museum on Main Street exhibitions, visit [www.MuseumonMainStreet.org](http://www.MuseumonMainStreet.org).



# Welcome

Welcome to the Exhibition Planning Guide, a tool we hope will help you systematically think through the process of planning an exhibition. It will guide you through the steps required to do conceptual planning, helping you to:

- look at your own collection and tell your community's story
- be relevant to your audiences
- develop an engaging, thoughtful, accurate exhibition



# What is an exhibition?

At its most basic, a history-focused exhibition is a display that tells a story. It is a communication medium. The key to developing a successful exhibition is understanding how the exhibition medium is different from other communication media. An exhibition should not be a book on the wall or a series of videos.

What draws a person to visit an exhibition as opposed to staying at home and watching a television program about the topic or going online to study a topic? How is an exhibition a unique medium, an experience people cannot get other places? There are three principles of museum exhibitions that are universal to all:

- The main business of exhibitions is to tell a story with things.  
Whether artifacts, images, or original documents, there is an intrinsic power in seeing the real thing. There is also great appeal in seeing something rare, an artifact or photograph that you cannot see anywhere else. The selection of things you display is very important. The objects and images help tell the story.
- Exhibitions are a medium for communication. T  
They communicate not only through words on labels, but through the combination of multi-media incorporated into the exhibition. The key to successful communication is ensuring that the message is received and understood.
- Exhibitions are experiences, not products.  
What audiences do and feel in an exhibition is as important as what they learn.

# Characteristics of effective exhibitions include:

- They are strongly dimensional, meaning they usually include objects, props, and other three-dimensional components and exist within a physical environment.
- They are designed to communicate to a general audience and should have components that speak to different learning styles and preferences and make them accessible to many people.
- They are able to engage different senses and should take advantage of this opportunity.
- They present a clear message.
- They do not require extensive prior knowledge of a topic and are designed so individual components can stand alone.
- They are designed to accommodate multiple users at a time and encourage social interaction<sup>III</sup>.

# Who should be involved in the planning process?

Exhibitions can be a complicated endeavor. Often a team of people will come together to complete the task. Content experts may be the people who did the research or who care for the collections. Designers bring the skills of both graphic design (laying out the text and images and objects) and 3-D design (how the visitors move through the space and what the overall space looks like). Education specialists understand how audiences learn in an informal environment and know how to reach different types of audiences. Often it is a good idea to form advisory panels to offer guidance on key elements. If you want teachers to use the exhibition, it might be good to form a teacher advisory panel. If your topic involves history of a specific community not represented in the core team, it is vital to engage with advisors from that community. For example, if your topic includes Native American history, it is important to reach out to advisors from this community and invite their participation in the exhibition development. This can be an ideal time to develop new partnerships. Your partners may not be history-focused. Sometimes the best partnerships are not obvious at first. These partnerships may be cultivated beyond the run of the exhibition and allow you to expand your collections, programming or research capabilities in the future.

## Purpose statement

At the very beginning, it is helpful to write a short purpose statement, up to a few sentences, that states the reason why you are doing the exhibition and what you want to accomplish by doing it. Is it about educating your audience, inspiring them to do something, making them aware of a specific topic or of your organization, or fostering partnerships? There can be many reasons why you develop an exhibition. With this internal goal as a guide, the work can move forward with clear purpose.

# What is your main message?

A key to an effective exhibition is keeping the message simple. Begin by asking the question, “What story do we want to tell?” The discussion should end with drafting a main message, sometimes called the “big idea” under which all content fits. It is not necessarily a message for external publication, but one that your development team should refer to constantly throughout the development process. Your main message is one of the most important pieces of conceptual planning. The task of writing this message can be a challenge. A big idea is defined as “one complete, noncompound, active sentence that identifies a subject, an action (the verb), and a consequence (“so what?”).” It is one idea, not several ideas crammed into one sentence. Exhibition expert Beverly Serrell notes in *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*, “A big idea is big because it has fundamental meaningfulness that is important to human nature.”<sup>ii</sup>

Examples of a main message:

“When they encountered each other, Lewis and Clark and the Indians made discoveries about their respective worlds.”

“During the Industrial Revolution, Americans harnessed natural forces and simple machines to build canal systems for transporting goods and materials cheaply.”

“World War II impacted the development of aviation technology and aviation technology changed the scope of warfare forever.”

As part of your discussion about the main message, ask these questions:

- Why is this topic important to your community, to your exhibition audience?
- Why should someone care about this? This question gets at relevance.
- Are we considering different sides of the topic/story? Any topic in history, any event, person, or idea, can be viewed from multiple perspectives. How will you incorporate these?
- How does this topic allow you to feature local people and stories?



# Who is your audience?

Another important step in producing a successful exhibition is identifying your audience. It may be easy to assume it will be a general audience—whoever comes through the door. But the more you can identify specific audiences, the stronger the exhibition will be and the easier it is to target your message. If you've produced exhibitions in the past, who visited? With every exhibition you produce, it is important to do some kind of demographic study to create a record of the types of audiences the topic attracted.

Devote some time to think about who your audiences are. With the new exhibition, who do you want to visit? Do you want more families, more students? Are there audiences you would like to visit who don't typically visit your site? There may be a certain group of people who you would like to see visit the exhibition. If so, what components can you include that will attract that audience? What topics or concerns do they have that could be reflected in your exhibition story?

For example, if you don't typically include components for younger ages, but would like to see more families, you will need to consider what experiences you can offer for people from different generations to do together. If you haven't attracted many school groups in the past but think the new topic is important for 5th graders to understand, then you will need to consider special components for that age.

Other specific types of audiences include:

- Military veterans
- Senior adults
- People with physical challenges (sight, hearing, mobility, etc.)
- People for whom English is not their native language
- International visitors
- Enthusiasts who know your topic very well
- People of different religious faiths
- College/university students

From the beginning, it is important to consider all of the types of people who may visit your exhibition and who you hope will visit.

## **Other items to consider**

### **Impact**

How do you want to affect your audiences? This question gets at emotion. Do you want them to leave inspired to change something? Do you want to encourage them to do further research or to talk to others about their experiences? Do you want them to feel proud, angry, or empathetic?

Tone can be closely tied to impact. What is the tone? You convey tone through the writing and design. While it is possible to mix several kinds of tone, it is usually best to pick one or two. Several examples include authoritative, serious, whimsical, formal, and casual.

### **Organization**

Organization includes both physical and conceptual layout. How will you organize the content? Is the format linear, free-flow, or thematic? In many ways the answer is linked to traffic flow in the exhibition. Many history exhibitions are chronological and follow a timeline. This linear format encourages visitors to all move in one direction. In a free-flow organization, there is no one way through and visitors can choose their path. A thematic format may be the same as free-flow. Rather than a linear story, the topic may be organized by main themes. If the topic is work, the themes might be outside work, white-collar work, medical work, aviation work, education work, etc. Ultimately, the exhibition's three-dimensional design helps to dictate traffic flow. Walls can funnel traffic and one clearly marked entrance can also help orient visitors.

Also, do you need to include any orientation to the topic? Often places like national parks produce an orientation film to give visitors an overview of the site's significance. As you assess the foundational knowledge of your visitors, you can consider how to ensure that a proper historical overview is included, whether an introduction panel is adequate to set the scene of your story, or whether you need to produce other types of components such as audio-visuals.



# Telling a good story

## What is your content?

Content can refer to the subject matter of the exhibition or the materials you use to tell the story. It includes the label text (called the exhibition script), photos, images, objects, audio, video, and interactive experiences.

Once you have decided what the main message/big idea is, you need to develop several other messages to support the main message. These messages are statements you want visitors to learn from the exhibition. They may be called primary messages or take-home messages. Like the main message, they are usually woven throughout the entire exhibition and supported with examples.



For example, your main message is: “When they encountered each other, Lewis and Clark and the Indians made discoveries about their respective worlds.” This infers that the expedition traveled through a peopled landscape and that the different cultures interacted with and influenced each other. Under this message could be additional messages such as:

“The encounters between Indians and Lewis and Clark demonstrate the difficulties and the rewards of cross-cultural exchange.” (This gets at relevance, it takes the main message and helps apply it to the present. It also reminds the team to be sure to include examples of both difficulties and rewards in the exhibition)

“Lewis and Clark traveled through a land inhabited by established cultures that were rich, diverse, and complex.” (This targets misconceptions; based on front end research, the team knows most people think Lewis and Clark traveled through a vacant landscape or encountered primitive native peoples)

“Historic objects can be interpreted in diverse ways, and each object conveys a cultural message.”<sup>iii</sup> (This reveals historical process and aims to help visitors understand some of the complexity of studying the past. It reminds the team to include multiple perspectives and show how objects convey messages.)

A story is usually told from the teller’s perspective. It is the teller’s interpretation of what happened. With history exhibitions, the story (or interpretation) should rest on solid history scholarship with facts at the core surrounded by interpretation of the historical evidence or primary sources. These sources can include documents, journals, business records, advertisements, oral histories, photographs, maps, or artifacts (objects).

The attributes of solid scholarship:

- Is built on accurate historical evidence and incorporates a variety of sources. There is no magic formula for the number of sources a history exhibition should include. But including a variety of kinds of sources (photos, maps, legal documents, personal letters, artifacts, and oral histories) makes the experience richer and helps to support multiple perspectives. Accurate historical evidence has been authenticated as an original source.
- Places story within historical context, both at the local level and to some extent at the national level. No historical event occurs in isolation. It’s important to provide context. What else was happening that shaped the outcomes and decisions involved in an event? How did the pieces of the story connect within the community? Are they connected to the wider world? Are there connections you can make at the national level? Were there similar events in other places? If not, what were the conditions in place so that it occurred where and when it did?

- Considers multiple perspectives and finds good balance. There are usually at least two perspectives to most events, often more. History can be compelling because it offers a range of viewpoints. You don't need to be talking about a controversial topic to find different perspectives. Solid history research attempts to provide a balance between perspectives.
- Acknowledges when evidence doesn't provide answers. Often, for various reasons, the historical evidence leaves holes in the story. We don't know a particular perspective or what someone was doing at a given time. It is important to acknowledge when this is the case.
- Presents evidence and acknowledges discrepancies between sources if they exist. Sometimes our sources offer conflicting views and they both seem valid. It's important to say this. Or one source may be more valid because other sources can corroborate its interpretation. Then make this point. Being transparent adds authenticity to our work, teaches the public about the historical process, and offers people a behind-the-scenes peek at research.
- Draws on the expertise of scholars, staff, community leaders and members. It often takes a team to develop a good exhibition. Many people beyond those with research experience can contribute knowledge and insight into historical topics. It benefits the entire project when a variety of voices are included in development.

When deciding the main message and stories you want to tell, you have an opportunity to research previously unknown stories and unearth artifacts in private collections. Are there stories you have not told in the past? This may be an opportunity to collect new stories from previously unheard voices.

The more relevant you can make an exhibition to your community the more powerful and valuable it will be. Relevance is the condition of being related or useful to what is happening or what people are talking about. On a personal level, relevance makes an individual feel connected. It answers the deep questions of "Why does this matter? Why should I care?" Value and relevance are intertwined. If something is not perceived as relevant, it usually does not have high value.



## The more relevant you can make an exhibition to your community the more powerful and valuable it will be.

In her book *The Art of Relevance*, Nina Simon writes: “Something is relevant if it gives you new information, if it adds meaning to your life, if it makes a difference to you. It’s not enough for something to be familiar, or connected to something you already know. Relevance leads you somewhere. It brings new value to the table.”<sup>iv</sup>

You also want your audience to see themselves reflected in your exhibition. By including higher level themes or universals, those topics that apply to everyone, you can be more inclusive and relevant to broader audiences. For example:

- If you are doing an exhibition about Shaker history, it might be hard for someone to relate to a group of religious, celibate, furniture makers. But by talking about community, sacrifice, and the desire to protect the environment, you can begin to draw your audience into your topic because they can more likely relate to these subjects.
- A museum doing an exhibition about the history of commercial aviation asked the question “who flew?” in the early 1950s. The photographs they planned to use showed wealthy, white travelers. Yet, black travelers were also beginning to fly. This led to the question of segregation in air travel. Additional research revealed some interesting material about this little-studied topic and allowed the exhibition developers to include photos of black air travelers and describe a letter campaign by a Congressman to the presidents of the major airlines describing the discriminatory treatment he received while flying, and requesting an end to segregation in airports.
- If you want to engage younger visitors, try to include images of children in the exhibition and to include material that relates to them.

The other crucial question to ask as you consider your story is what materials will illustrate the story. Before you move forward, you must assess whether or not you have the materials you need. The “things” are crucial in an exhibition

medium. You are not writing a book. If the materials are not in your collection, can you borrow them, or acquire them? Many collections have holes and most museums face this problem at some point. Perhaps your community demographics have changed over time and your collection doesn't reflect this. Or your collection focuses on history of technology and you want to tell people stories with more focus on social history. You don't necessarily need a budget to acquire new objects. By cultivating relationships and establishing partnerships with new groups in your community, you may find people eager to contribute to your collections with objects or with personal experiences. By involving key community advisors in the planning process, you gain their influence and access to their networks of potential contributors.

## Audience Evaluation

One of the hardest tasks when developing a successful exhibition is knowing where to start your story and how much background information to provide. This requires gaining an understanding of your audience's base knowledge of the topic. If you're talking about the Cold War, you can't assume that younger generations know what it is. In fact, they don't. You will need to offer a description of the Cold War. But you need to know how much description is necessary. A segment of your audience will always include people who know much about your topic. Obviously audience members bring differing degrees of knowledge into the exhibition; you are looking for a base line.

There are several simple ways to assess audience knowledge and interest in a topic before you start developing an exhibition. This kind of evaluation is called front-end evaluation. To collect this data, you can either go to audiences already visiting your institution or you can go outside to potential audiences, say at a shopping mall or park or local cultural institution.

There are three main points in the development of an exhibition where it is helpful to collect audience feedback using evaluation.

**Front-end evaluation** – collected at the beginning of development; can help you understand visitor knowledge of your topic and expectations



**Formative evaluation** – collected during development; this allows you to make improvements and can focus on label design or format, exhibition title, hands-on and interactive elements, or other components in development

**Summative evaluation** – collected after completion of the exhibition; this allows you to better understand how effective you were with your purpose statement, main message, and other components. Combined with demographic information from exhibition attendance, it will tell you if you reached your target audiences and will help inform future exhibitions

Evaluation does not have to be a lengthy, labor-intensive, or expensive process. The sample size is the number of evaluations you collected and may be a small number when compared with your anticipated or actual attendance numbers. There is no ideal target sample size since it varies with each project. After you begin evaluation, you often quickly see a pattern emerge in audience answers.

The main methods of audience evaluation are:

**Survey/questionnaire** – filled out by visitors or used by an interviewer. A series of questions that can be multiple choice or scaled ratings (quantitative) or open-ended questions (qualitative).

**Interview** – collected by an interviewer. A series of open-ended questions. Requires more work to tabulate the answers because they are all different.

**Focus group** – conducted by trained personnel. A facilitated conversation with a group of people featuring a series of open-ended questions.

**Observation** – collected by trained personnel. Usually does not include direct interaction with the audience. May include observations of visitors in the exhibition, how they travel through it, which videos they watch, how much time they spent in it.

# Engaging your audience

Since exhibitions are a medium for communication, you want to do as much as you can to make the exhibition as physically and intellectually accessible as possible. This requires a certain understanding of various audiences and their needs. Generally, when you make something more accessible to a specific audience, it usually improves accessibility for other audiences as well.

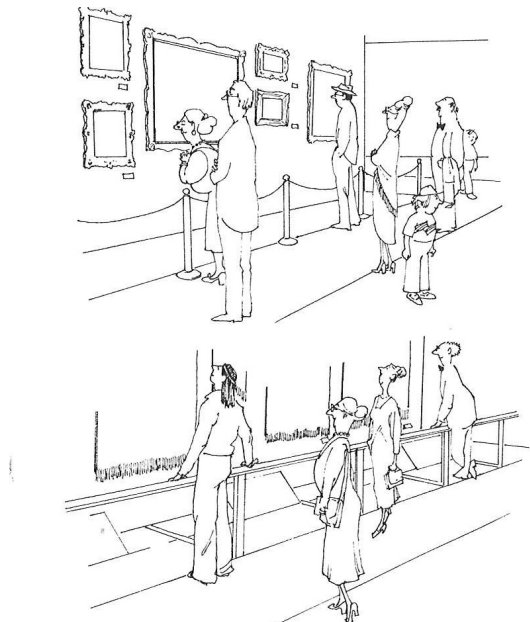
## Physical access:

Blindness and low vision – audio components are important as are tactile components whenever possible. Tactile interactives, including models and reproductions, should reference the major themes of the exhibition. Color contrast should be clear and font styles should be easy to read. Lighting should allow ease of seeing artifacts. If a map with small print is vital to your story, find ways to make it accessible with a magnifying glass, or printed sheets showing it enlarged. Videos can contain special narration which gives viewers with low vision detailed descriptions of the actions and images on the screen.

Hearing loss – videos can be open-captioned and/or closed-captioned. Open-captioning displays the video transcript on the screen readily for easier viewing. Audio experiences could also be made available as hard-copy transcripts for these visitors.

Mobility loss – labels and cases should allow for ease of viewing for someone seated in a chair. If a space within the exhibition requires movement up stairs, ensure that there is an alternate way for chair users to access the information.

Autism Spectrum – consider what you may be able to provide for visitors on the autism spectrum, who may need special “sensory-friendly” times to visit or interact with the exhibition.



For more information regarding physical accessibility and Americans with Disabilities Act guidelines for museum exhibitions, see the Smithsonian Guidelines for Accessible Exhibition Design at <https://www.si.edu/Accessibility/SGAED>

### **Intellectual access:**

How will you ensure an active learning experience? A deeper learning experience requires that the audience is engaged in and directing its own discovery. According to the Museum Educator's Manual, active learning in exhibitions “promotes reflection, dialogue, and closer inspection. It uses inquiry [questions] and interactive elements embedded in exhibitions to help visitors explore, discover, and construct meaning as they engage with the museum's collections.”<sup>v</sup>

Knowing how people learn or process information is important. There are many learning theories. One model that describes learning preferences, called IPOP, identifies people according to the information they seek out and find compelling.

The Smithsonian Institution's Office of Policy and Analysis developed IPOP to frame exhibition development and visitor preference. IPOP stands for:

- Ideas (concepts, abstractions, linear thought, rational reasoning and facts)
- People (emotions, stories, and social interactions)
- Objects (things, aesthetics, craftsmanship, ownership, and visual languages)
- Physical experience (physical sensations, including movement, touch, sound, lights, and smells)

A visitor might first be attracted to a strong idea, an emotional connection, a striking object, or a physical experience. IPOP also argues that visitors can “flip” and have a strong reaction to an experience different than those that usually attract them. This flipping can leave a memorable imprint for the visitor.

Interactives are often part of the exhibition experience and appeal to many types of learners, not just children. Museums define interactivity in many different ways. A tactile or hands-on component is not necessarily interactive. A good interactive requires a mental response, not just a physical response. According to Kathleen McLean, “Interactivity is about being reciprocal.” She says qualities of effective

interactives include:

- Focused – one clear learning objective
- Simple directions
- Requires a thoughtful response
- Provides an outcome based on visitor input
- Clearly relates to and reinforces exhibition's main ideas
- May ask the visitor to:
  - Conduct activities
  - Gather evidence
  - Select options
  - Form conclusions
  - Test skills
  - Provide input
  - Alter a situation based on input<sup>vi</sup>

Interactives come in all shapes and sizes, from digital to mechanical. One common misconception is that they always cost a lot to develop and fabricate. Sometimes just simulating the weight of a block or ice to discuss keeping food cool or the weight of a backpack that a soldier was required to carry offers a new appreciation for people from the past. For example a label can state that an average bucket of water used to do laundry in the 1800s weighed twenty-one pounds. But when a visitor can lift a twenty-one pound bucket and learns that the average load of laundry required twenty buckets of water, they suddenly have empathy for a laundress from the past and understand that strength was required to do the laundry.

**A good interactive  
requires a mental  
response, not just a  
physical response.**

A simple interactive in an exhibition at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum featured a circular plastic disc that visitors could put onto two different surfaces, one smooth and one rippled. They are asked to compare the surfaces and to evaluate on which surface it was easier to remove the disc. The disc represents a sea plane and the surfaces represents calm and choppy water. Pilots of sea planes face the challenge of taking off from smooth water, something that

seems counterintuitive. The interactive explains the concept of hydrostatic friction in an easy way.

The key to effective interactives is testing. The more complex they are, the more they should be tested while under development to ensure that visitors understand how to manipulate them and receive the learning objective.

## Writing the script

Writing the exhibition labels (the exhibition script) is not easy because it requires knowledge of both the content and the audience, plus requires excellent writing skills. While the content specialist may want to draft an outline or write a rough draft, he or she may not be the best person to write the final script. Whoever writes the script, a content expert and an education specialist should review the draft.

There are generally two main types of labels, interpretive and noninterpretive labels. Interpretive labels tell the story, noninterpretive labels don't and include donor and credit panels, navigation information (wayfinding) and identification labels listing object names and date. Within these two categories are different types of labels that vary greatly from museum to museum. The important point is that all labels should work as part of an integrated system; pieces of the whole exhibition.

Within the interpretive label category are titles, introductions, section labels, group labels and captions. Each type of label may have a different font size and word length, but again, they must fit into an integrated



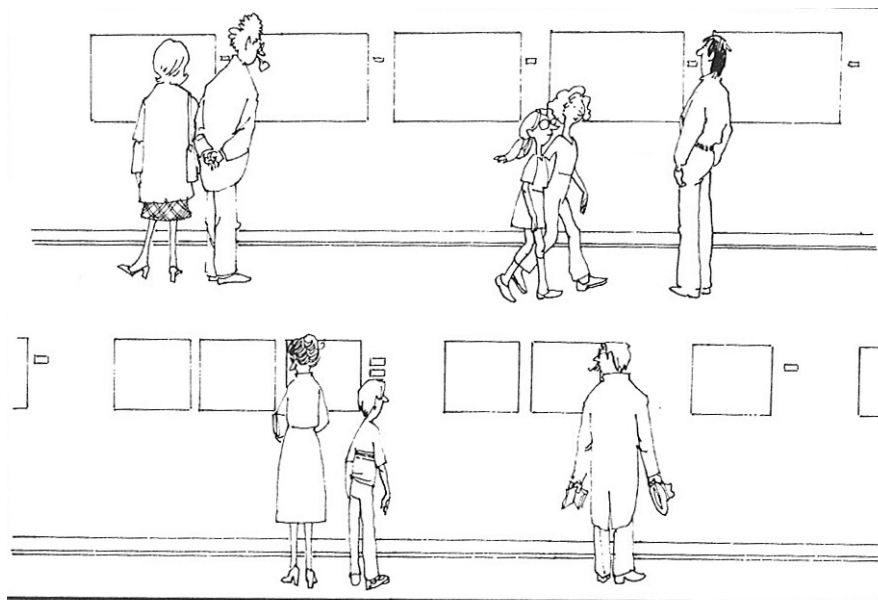
system. They each have a different role as well. Titles should attract attention, section labels introduce a topic for an area within the exhibition, and captions highlight a specific object or image.

It is important to remember that visitors will often not proceed through the exhibition in the “ideal way” your team envisions. In fact, according to Beverly Serrell, sometimes the only labels visitors will read are captions. When an object catches a visitors attention, the visitor want to know what it is and other related information. For this reason, it is important that captions start with visual, concrete information that describes what visitors can see. Move from this specific information to more general information. Keep information specific to what visitors are seeing.<sup>vii</sup>

Example from the National Air and Space Museum:

#### Juan Trippe’s Globe

From his office in New York City, Pan American president Juan T. Trippe used this globe to plan his airline’s expansion around the world. Trippe often would stretch a string between two points on the globe and calculate the distance and time it would take to fly between them. Made in the mid-1800s, this globe was featured prominently in many publicity photographs of Trippe. It became part of Pan Am’s and Trippe’s public image.



One of the biggest challenges for anyone writing an exhibition script is staying concise and determining the correct balance of information that is most effective. Some people prefer not to read labels, others desire much information. Beverly Serrell suggests five words per second as an average museum reading speed. She advises to write labels so that they can be read quickly—ten seconds or less. While label length varies greatly among museums, Serrell suggest the following in her book *Exhibit Labels*:

Exhibition title	1-7 words
Introductory labels	20-125
Group labels	20-75
Caption labels	20-75

Psychologist Stephen Bitgood has studied how visitors interact with museum labels and he lists three factors that help visitors increase their focus during the visit:

- Minimize the perceived effort to read —this means delete jargon, check readability level (should be no more than eighth grade level), and avoid large chunks of text.
- Provoke interest in the subject matter — combine questioning strategies with unexpected content; ask “why” questions.
- Minimize distracting factors — this is where a designer is helpful to ensure no shadows on text or difficult color contrasts on labels.<sup>viii</sup>
- Two additional points could be added to his list:
- Help visitors make personal connections to content —this can be accomplished with questioning strategies.
- Direct visitor’s attention to specific objects or artworks, called directed looking.



Unfortunately inquiry (questioning strategies) is absent in many exhibition labels. Inquiry and directed looking are both strategies to increase visitor focus. Consider using these strategies for a more active approach to labels:<sup>ix</sup>

**Layered text** — write information in chunks, with the most important sentence in a large font or with a question as the title, then provide more detail in smaller text chunks below

**Questions** — look for places to ask a question, ask what a visitor notices about an artifact, promote discussion among family members,

**Directed Looking** — write statements that direct visitors' attention to specific features of objects, ask visitors to make comparisons, and direct them to take a closer look for a detail

Asking good questions is not easy. There are two main types of questions: cognitive, which help people process and apply information, and affective, which challenge people to feel or imagine. Posing provocative questions within an exhibition panel encourages visitors to engage in conversation with their group or prompts self-reflection. Social interaction is one motivating factor often cited for museum visits.

As stated in *The Museum Educator's Manual*, "One challenge to incorporating inquiry into exhibitions is making the questions clear, direct, and easy to understand; otherwise, visitors will not invest their valuable time. The answer needs to be readily available or the problem solvable."<sup>x</sup>

Examples of inquiry and directed looking:

"Historians think this photo was staged, what do you think?" The surrounding context helps visitors easily answer the question.

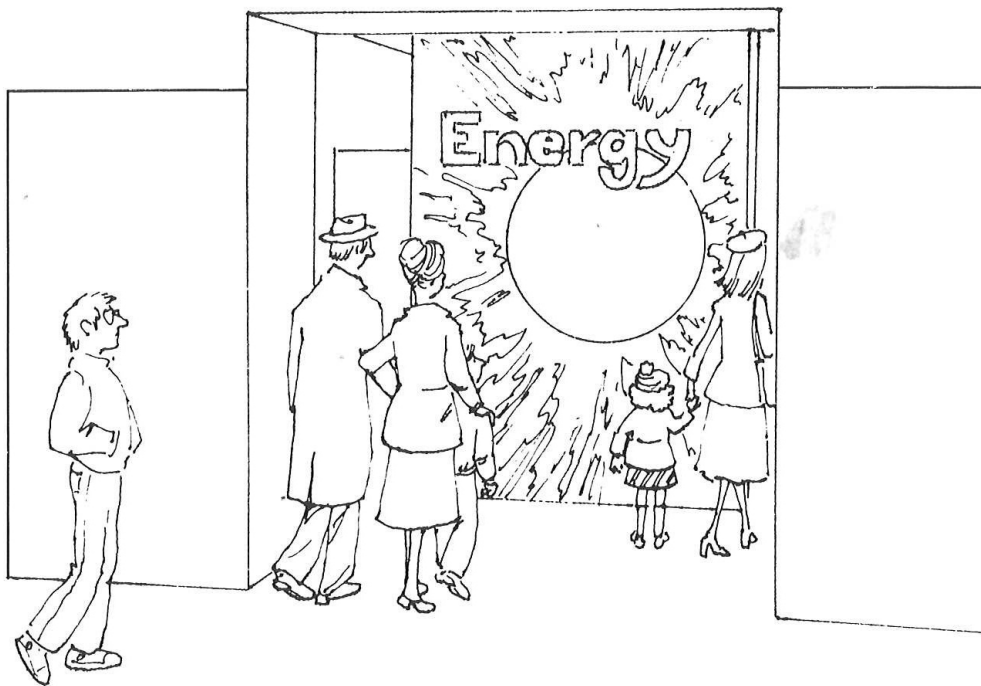
Image of a newspaper headline and several paragraphs of an article: Along with flying, what other activities were prohibited for Hollywood stars in the 1930s?

A wall of advertisements for train and airplane travel to the same destination. The label reads: "If you were deciding which method of transportation to use, compare the cost, comfort and time required for each type of travel. Which would you choose?"



One challenging audience to plan for is multi-generational families. Writing for different ages and educational levels can be daunting. There are various approaches to ensuring that even younger visitors are engaged in your content:

- Create a specific place in the exhibition where the family group can work together to solve a historical or scientific problem, put a puzzle together, or construct something.
- Write a series of child-friendly labels, clearly identified, that address items of interest to the target group.
- Create a separate printed family guide that is given to adults in a group and helps them make content accessible to younger ages or provides complementary content for younger ages.
- Family programs scheduled throughout the run of the exhibition.



Knowing what motivates visitors is important. Often museum staff assumes that people visit an exhibition because they want to learn. This is not necessarily true. They may be on a social outing with friends or family. Maybe they want to see something rare or beautiful. A study done for the Smithsonian National Museum

of Natural History in 2009 identified six key elements that lead visitors to view an exhibition experience as particularly interesting, memorable, engaging or inspiring:

**Relevance** – Visitors must be able to relate their experience to their own life. It should offer something they can apply to their life.

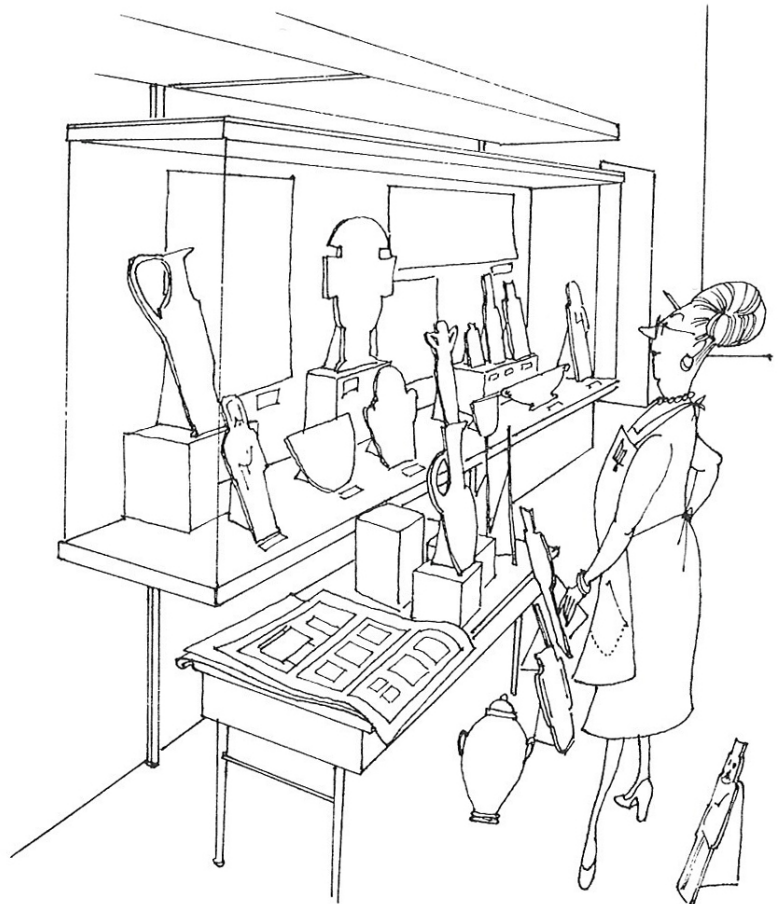
**Customization** – Visitors want a degree of flexibility to customize their experience to suit their personalities, interests or moods.

**Immersion** – Visitors appreciated being fully immersed in the content by a component that took them out of the museum setting and into another place/time.

**Dynamic content** – Visitors desire to see or experience action, movement and change.

**One-of-a-kind experience** –  
Rare objects or  
new technology or  
something uncommon  
in everyday life.

**A sense of wonder**  
– Information and  
ideas that haven't  
encountered before  
or unexpected  
experiences.



# Beyond the exhibition

Many exhibitions include supplemental experiences or products that enhance the exhibition. These should be considered near the beginning of exhibition development as funds or space or other resources may need to be raised or allocated for them. Some of these are:

- Educational/curriculum materials – another reason a teacher advisory panel could be useful
- School program/tour
- Programs such as lecture series, film series, or concerts – you may want to consider programming space adjacent to the exhibition
- Website
- Publication – catalog or newsletter or magazine devoted to the exhibition
- Family event

## End note

Every exhibition is an opportunity to tell a unique story and to introduce new audiences to your research and collections. Exhibitions call for creativity and for thinking outside the box. They also offer a chance to experiment and try new methods and technologies. When you reveal stories that haven't been told and voices that haven't been heard, you show a desire to be relevant to all. Exhibitions allow you to connect more deeply with your community as you find new partnerships, work with new advisors, and demonstrate your willingness to be a vital part of the fabric of society.

## References

- i Kathleen McLean, *Planning for People in Museum Exhibitions*. (Washington, D.C.: ASTC, 1996), 16.
- ii Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*. 2nd edition. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015) 7.
- iii Taken from *Lewis and Clark: The National Bicentennial Exhibition* developed by the Missouri Historical Society.
- iv Nina Simon, *The Art of Relevance*. (Santa Cruz, CA: Museum 2.0, 2016), 29.
- v Anna Johnson, Kimberly A. Huber, Nancy Cutler, Melissa Bingmann, and Tim Grove, *The Museum Educator's Manual*. 2nd edition. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 77-78.
- vi *The Museum Educator's Manual*, 83-4.
- vii *Exhibit Labels*, 35-6
- viii Stephen Bitgood, "The Role of Attention in Designing Effective Interpretive Labels," *Journal of Interpretation Research* 5, no. 2 (2003):31-45.
- ix *The Museum Educator's Manual*, 72
- x *Ibid*, 78.