



EXHIBIT DEVELOPMENT TIPS

Remember the Audience

Exhibitions are audience centered, that is we identify both the primary and secondary audiences early in the process to be certain our educational objectives and communication goals are effective and targeted. The thinner you can slice the audience segment, the more likely you are to achieve your objectives. The exhibition does not have to be for everyone.

Exhibitions Show, They Don't Tell

As visual media, exhibitions work best when they are object and image centered. Long, sequential, unbroken blocks of copy just do not get read. Most visitors sample in random and rarely sequential ways, so exhibition text needs to:

- Be engaging
- Have a distinctive, accessible voice
- Be broken up in independent and manageable chunks
- Have engaging headlines

Read the label and ask yourself, "Is this the voice of someone I would love to sit next to at a dinner party?" Passion and enthusiasm are fine in exhibitions, avoid peer fear and speak to your audience in direct and engaging ways. You don't have to 'dumb down' the information, but you do have to turn on the visitor. People like meeting real scientists and scholars in exhibitions, not disembodied institutional voices. Make it personal.

Exhibitions are Provocative, Not Comprehensive

This is the good news. You do not have to tell everything you know about a topic. Rather, you provoke the visitor to want to find out more by reading a book, attending a lecture, surfing the Web, seeing a film, taking a course. The exhibit experience should be seen as a threshold to learning, not an endpoint.



When is a Good Question Better Than a Declaration?

Learning is an interactive, looping process, not a linear one. Asking a provocative question in a headline will open up that interactive loop and motivate a visitor to look and read deeper. "Why is there a fish bone in your ear" or "Why should you care about a coal swamp?" will draw and hold visitors attention more readily than "The Evolution of the Inner Ear" or "Botanical Diversity in the Devonian Coal Swamp." Creating a little dissonance in viewers is a good thing, as the resolution of the dissonance can be the learning experience. Asking unexpected, provocative questions is a good way to pique interest in a topic visitors are not predisposed to care about. If visitors are able to frame better questions about a topic after viewing an exhibition, it has been a great success.

Interaction, Unexpected Connections, Surprises - Even a Little Humor - are Good Things

Interaction does not mean blindly pushing buttons. It means the effective combination of hands-on with minds-on learning. Asking visitors to do things is both polite and effective. An exhibition, unlike a book, allows the visitor to comfortably move back and forth, making comparisons and connections. A label like...

Compare this tooth to the one on the right. How are they different? How are they the same? Are they related? Dr. Smith studied these teeth. Press the button to hear her surprising conclusions.

...can be an effective way to encourage viewers to interact and do things at an exhibition. Visitors will spend more time learning if they feel they have initiated the information. Exhibitions are multi-sensory experiences, the more senses you can engage in the learning process, the more effective and memorable it will be. So, if visitors can hear, see, touch, smell, or taste in the exhibition, it is better than just passively looking.



Match Medium with Message

The statement of purpose is where you identify the function, objectives, central questions, and audience for the exhibition. It is also where you decide if the correct medium for delivering the message is indeed an exhibition at all. The message may be better communicated in an article, video, brochure, book, etc. than in an exhibition. Exhibitions are object-centered, multi-sensory, multi-media, non-sequential, and provocative learning tools. Be certain the story uses these characteristics fully. Be careful not to engage in 'scope creep' and data-dumping: meaning that you turn to computer interactives and videos instead of focusing and editing your content. Videos must be less than two minutes if visitors are to view them standing and less than six minutes if there is seating. Kids are much more likely to use computer interactives than adults, and they need a lot of testing before you find the design that achieves your educational objectives. Take home brochures and activities are more effective than lengthy videos and computer data bases.

Chora is an educational consulting firm with over 35 years of experience in the education and museum business. We would love to think together with you about your exhibit projects.

Maria Elena Gutierrez
mgutierrez@choracreative.com

Robert Sullivan
rsullivan@choracreative.com