Designing Exhibits That Engage Visitors: Bob’s Top Ten Points

In several conference and workshop presentations, my colleague Ted Ansbacher and I have emphasized the central importance of the exhibit experience, that is, what people see and do in the exhibits. Many times museum designers talk about the educational outcomes of exhibits, often couched in terms of “cognitive” and “affective” outcomes of impacts. With this great emphasis on outcomes, we may shortchange the attention given to the exhibit experience itself. In this article, I offer my “Top Ten Points” (with more detailed suggestions) for designing engaging exhibit experience-based exhibits.

An experience-based exhibit is one where a visitor’s direct experience – what the visitor sees and does – is the key. An experience-based exhibit emphasizes the visitor’s active involvement, physical and/or intellectual, in the experience. Good examples of experience-based exhibits include:

- Interactive science exhibits, where visitors directly manipulate variables that affect the phenomenon they are observing.
- Art exhibits, where visitors actively experience and think about the aesthetic objects on display.
- Animal exhibits, where visitors directly observe living animals and perhaps take note of and analyze specific behaviors, relationships, and environmental contexts.

These types of exhibit experiences can be contrasted with what can be called “information-based” exhibits. Here, a primary goal of the exhibit is to “transmit” specific information to visitors, through a combination of displays, informational text, and informational videos. A linear, history exhibit, with a display of objects, artifacts, and interpretive text, is an example of a typical information-based exhibit. When we ask what a visitor learns from an information-based exhibit, what we usually mean is what information and factual knowledge visitors have acquired. The exhibit experience, then, is de-valued, in favor of what “factoids” visitors may have picked up from text.

Some information-based exhibits can be effective. This is usually when the exhibit topic itself is of great interest to visitors and when experience-based approaches are incorporated in the overall experience. The Smithsonian National Museum of American History Museum’s exhibit “From Field to Factory” has been cited as an effective presentation of the story of the migration of African-Americans from the South to the more industrialized and urban North. The exhibit recreates environments from the time. One of the most effective elements, which might be considered experience-based, is where visitors must
decide whether they will go through the “White Only” or “Colored” doorway to pass from one gallery to the next.

The Top Ten Points for Designing Engaging Exhibits

For an exhibit experience to be of any significance, visitors must spend some time (become engaged) with the exhibit. There are a variety of factors that can influence how effectively an exhibit engages a visitor. What follows is a listing of ten broad guidelines to consider when designing exhibits that can effectively engage or involve visitors:

1. **Provide advance organizers:** Visitors may have little experience with the exhibit content. Exhibit content should begin with something familiar. There should be an obvious starting point, so visitors can begin easily and with confidence in a “low-risk” environment. A title, introduction, or thematic areas may help visitors make connections.

   Key points:
   - Exhibit titles should convey essence of exhibit.
   - Big ideas help visitors organize exhibit experiences.
   - Provide visitors with obvious starting points.
   - Theme exhibits for greater visitor involvement.

2. **Design accessible, attractive, inviting, involving environments:** It is important to design exhibit environments and elements that visitors find attractive, welcoming, and easy to get involved with.

   Key points:
   - Inviting and attractive exhibit design.
   - Provide comfortable, safe, and secure exhibit environments.
   - Design for non-intimidating environments and non-distracting environments.
   - Design physically and intellectually accessible activities and content.
   - Design for some immersive exhibit experience.

3. **Design accessible and easy-to-use exhibits:** Exhibits are like new products. Some are easy to use, but poorly designed exhibits are like many VCR’s or computers—hard to figure out.

   Key points:
   - Use good mapping (easy to see what to do, the relation between actions and results, controls and effects).
   - Use appropriate technology, media.
   - Design to provide visitors with a sense of direct engagement.
   - Design for visibility (can look at exhibit and easily see alternatives to action).
• Design for simplicity.
• Design so that visitors can use Information available in the world (low-reliance on remote instructions to operate exhibit).
• Design for error (so visitors find it easy to get started again).
• Standardize exhibit graphics and interfaces so visitors can generalize some functional knowledge (e.g., where to find directions on how to use exhibits) from one exhibit to the next.

4. **Present real objects/phenomenon:** Many visitors report that they go to museums to see and experience things they can’t easily experience in their everyday lives. This includes seeing rare art objects, artifacts, and animals; seeing and experiencing unusual physical phenomenon; and being “Wowed!”

Key points:
- Present genuine, real objects and phenomenon
- Design emotionally and intellectually involving experiences
- Design for the “Wow” factor

5. **Meet visitor expectations:** Visitors enjoy the educational, entertainment, and social aspects of a museum visitor.

Key points:
- Design so visitors can have some fun
- Design to meet the expectations visitors have for an educational experience
- Design to encourage social interaction
- Design to engage all the senses
- Design to pique curiosity, surprise and intrigue
- Design to Instill a sense of confidence

6. **Provide entry points to meet individual visitors’ needs:** Each museum visitor brings his or her life experiences, learning styles, and other individual qualities that influence their museum experience. Visitors often find effective starting points when they find something familiar or a problem or question they find challenging.

Key points:
- Design to meet the needs of high-priority target audiences.
- Do front-end evaluation to identify target audience knowledge, interests, and reactions to proposed exhibit elements.
- Use mixed-media to meet interests and needs of visitors of different ages, interests, and cultural backgrounds.
- Provide appropriate tools to allow visitors to use exhibits effectively.
- Posing a question (or causing visitors to pose their own questions) provides the prime motivation for visitors to get started and continue along the inquiry path.
7. **Offer visitors choices, control, feedback, and success:**
Visitors can personalize their visits if they have choices, exert some control over their experiences, and get feedback (the consequences of their choices). The effects of a visitor’s actions should be clear and happen with little or no delay. The visitor should be able to try different actions and observe different results. Exhibits should allow for success. Success is reaching a satisfying point along the inquiry path.

Key points:
- **Choice and control:**
  - Provide built-in goals, “natural” goals inherent in the experience.
  - Provide open-ended (not too open-ended) options.
  - Make available multiple inquiry paths with clear procedures.
  - Layer experiences and labels.
  - Offer sequences of actions at increasing levels of complexity.

- **Immediate and continuous feedback and some success:**
  - Continual challenge and feedback.
  - Opportunities to manipulate variables with clearly observable results.
  - Visible exhibit components.
  - Provide “natural” indications of success (a result, such as a building standing up, a chemical reaction).

8. **Support direct experiences with labels, staff explainers, and opportunities for cooperative engagement:**
Most museums have a wealth of objects and experiences available. Visitors may exploit only a few and spend little time at any individual exhibit element. Museums can encourage in-depth experiences by: providing labels or staff/docent facilitation directing attention to objects or phenomenon immediately at hand; encouraging cooperative activities; and providing related educational programming.

Key points:
- **Provide labels/staff explainers directly supporting exhibit experiences that:**
  - Identify what’s there.
  - Point out things to notice.
  - Provide instructions.
  - Suggest things to do.
  - Raise questions.
  - Answer questions.
  - Connect to other experiences.
  - Place in context.
Encourage cooperative engagement by:
- Providing collaborative activities for parent/child, peers, and family groups.
- Suggesting opportunities for conversation.
- Physically designing exhibits for multiple participants.

Provide related educational programming (films, demos, etc. are a part of many museum experiences), such as:
- Demonstrations.
- Discovery carts.
- Facilitated activities, experiments in exhibit.
- Take home materials.

9. **Provide support for follow-up educational experiences:**
A museum experience can pique curiosity and motivate interest. Museums can help visitors follow-up on their newly developed interests by providing extended learning resources.

Key points:
- Provide related books in resource area, gift shop, libraries
- Provide Web page resources.
- Provide follow-up classes, field trips, outreach
- Provide leads to other community resources
- Point out opportunities to work on related projects in museum.

10. **Evaluate:**
Like any new product, untested exhibit can have serious flaws. Evaluation can help improve the relevance, functionality, and effectiveness of exhibits.

Key points:
- Front-end evaluation can help provide starting points for exhibit design by identifying visitor knowledge, interests, and preferences.
- Formative evaluation can improve the quality of exhibits by identifying mechanical and conceptual elements that need revision.
- Summative evaluation can help assess the overall effectiveness and outcomes of the exhibit experience.

Robert L. Russell is Co-Editor of The Informal Learning Review.