

## Introduction: Best Practices Should Be a Tool, Not a Rule

As museum scholar Michael Spock is often fond of saying, “Exhibition development is like rocket science.” It is complex, difficult, and time-consuming. Each exhibition is a unique, custom-designed environment with its own particular experiences, its own unique lens on the world, and its own specific set of audiences.

And yet, in these times of ninety-second sound bites, instant replays, and short attention spans, it is tempting to be lured by prescriptives that offer checklists, simple ways to succeed, or easy steps to doing something better than we already do. The practice of exhibition development is no exception. In classes, workshops, and conference sessions, people consistently ask for road maps to success. “Just tell me what I have to do,” they say, as if one set of directions could steer all efforts along the right course.

While there is no tried-and-true formula for exhibition success, the following list includes some of the elements that characterize “best practices” in science exhibition development. The list was culled from the responses of museum professionals to a questionnaire on science exhibition development, and from dialogue during the 2003 *Best Practices in Science Exhibition Development* conference. (See Appendix A.)

Good exhibition development is characterized by:

- meaningful involvement with scientists, educators, and others
- positive collaborations, including team planning, design, and development
- evaluation (front-end, formative, summative, remedial)
- careful prototyping
- focusing on visitors and designing for meaningful interactivity
- excellent design of exhibits and space
- clear goals and objectives
- ample time and money
- effective project management
- ongoing maintenance and upgrading
- institutional support

And the visitor outcomes that such practices tend to promote include:

- memorable experiences
- ongoing conversation and inquiry
- wonder and excitement
- personal relevance and meaning-making
- accessible and comprehensible content
- a comfortable and engaging environment

But there’s an important caveat: These items should not be seen as a checklist for success. In fact, most of the contributors to this list would probably disagree with at least one or two of the items on it. Conversely, many of these aspects of exhibition development have been touted as panaceas. In the early 1980s, for example, as a result of The Field Museum Kellogg Project *Museums: Agents for Public Education*, the “team approach” to exhibition development was adopted in many museums as a guarantee for success. In the project’s summary publication, *Open Conversations: Strategies for Professional Development in Museums* (Blackmon, LaMaster, Roberts, and Serrell, 1988), the comment that “team-work ensures that the right combination of abilities and expertise will be applied to get the job done” was taken literally by hundreds of exhibition professionals. While a great deal of effort went into adopting the team approach, the quality of most of the exhibitions created with this approach did not necessarily improve as a result.

Soon thereafter, evaluation was considered to be the new key to success, with some practitioners claiming that front-end and formative evaluation guaranteed a successful exhibition. Other aspects also have been proposed as the key at one time or another, including interactivity, the use of multimedia, focusing on “the big idea,” and employing professional project management practices. What becomes evident to those who work in the field for any length of time is that no one key will do the trick—we need the whole key ring at our disposal so we can decide which keys to use for specific purposes. And, based on past experience, we’ll probably always find that a few keys are still missing.

The longer I work in museums, the more I feel that most exhibition development is stuck in the old and the tried—

and the tired. Real innovation tends to appear sporadically and in very small doses. When I ask colleagues about recent exhibitions that were inspiring, provoking of thought or emotions, or likely to be long-remembered, their familiar silences and shrugs tell me that they share my feelings. It seems we all are spending more and more of our time following tried and true formulas, and most of us spend very little time engaging in any kind of critical dialogue about exhibition strengths and weaknesses. In the ten years that I organized the “Critiquing Museum Exhibitions” sessions at the American Association of Museums’ annual conference, and during my time as exhibition review editor for *Curator: The Museum Journal*, it took quite a bit of effort to find exhibitions that seemed truly fresh, innovative, or unusual. At the same time, many practitioners insisted that reviews and critiques should be based on a set of agreed-upon standards or criteria, standards that could be taught, assimilated, and used as quantifiable measures of “best.”

I have seen the deadening effects that occur when prescriptions take the place of innovation, when the dogma of current practice replaces the uncertainty of the creative process. Here, in “The Best of Practices, The Worst of Times,” Jay Rounds challenges us to be more exploratory and innovative in our work—to be less standards-driven and more open to the unknown and the untested, and to focus our energy on exploration, innovation, and even paradigm-breaking. He suggests that in times like these, when the environment is changing in unpredictable ways, we need to be able to “adapt successfully to newly-emerging circumstances.” And he warns us that exploration will certainly be short-circuited by seeing best practices as a rigid set of guidelines or a structured program that reduces the variety of practice in the field. The problem, then, lies in *how* these best practices are applied.

I think the greatest constraint to innovation in science exhibitions is the conservative nature of our organizational cultures. As we engage in strategic planning, we reaffirm our missions, articulate goals and objectives, and create our own organizational set of guidelines—guidelines which are often quite restrictive. For example, a colleague recently described

lobbying in his program committee for an interesting and unusual adult-oriented program, only to be told that, since their new target audience was kids and families, the adult program was no longer appropriate for their organization—no matter how engaging it was. And, with an increasing focus on satisfying the market, we play it even safer: Only if an idea has strong marketing appeal does it get through the first round of considerations. Yet some of the most interesting and innovative exhibitions in this book did not, at first blush, seem like market winners. Even in my own organization, long considered an innovator and trailblazer, I find it difficult to get us to try things out of the ordinary, often hearing “we don’t do that here” in response to a suggestion for experimentation.

It is easy to place the onus of this conservatism on our organizational cultures or the power structures we must respond to (like funding agencies). But we must also accept some individual responsibility for the problem. Many of us take an “anything for a quiet life” approach to these challenges. We would rather play it safe than take on the risky and distasteful role of provocateur. Conversely, some of our most profound innovations have emerged as a result of external pressures. Take, for example, the role the National Science Foundation has played in promoting visitor research and evaluation: If NSF had not insisted that a portion of their funds be spent assessing the effects of our work on visitors, many of us would still be describing the beautiful robes of our emperors.

As a field, we need to give more thought and resources to experimentation, even if it is risky. For those of us in large organizations, I think the “skunk works” model (“protected” from the ongoing operations of the institution) is the best way to go. We need to create some small pockets of space and time, without all of the constraints inherent in striving for high visitor attendance and stakeholder approval. We need to challenge the assumptions embedded in our organizational cultures. For those of us working in smaller organizations, if we can’t find the internal resources to experiment, invent, and innovate, we need to partner with others who can.

Just as a focus on experimentation can free us to think more creatively, a focus on best practices can keep us informed and honest. But our field has a tendency toward the a-historical, with uninformed practitioners, in the guise of exploration, often wasting resources and creativity exploring well-trodden ground in familiar ways—the old, tried, and tired. If practicing architects were as unfamiliar with the history of buildings as exhibit professionals are with the work of their colleagues, we'd still be living in small boxes in the shadows of stone pyramids. The explorer who adds collective value to the field of science exhibition development is informed by the best practices of others and by what has been done in the past.

If we are to avoid simplistic and unrealistic notions of “best practices,” we need to be reflective practitioners (Schon, 1990). We need to reflect on and describe those elements essential to the creation of good exhibitions, and we need to do so with skepticism and critical thinking.

The articles, essays, commentary, and questions in Part One: The Conversations are meant to be provocative, to stimulate our thinking, and to challenge our own assumptions about what we value in the exhibition-development process and why. Patrick Tevlin and Beverly Serrell encourage us to consider what kinds of goals are restrictive and deadening, and what kinds are liberating and supportive of creativity. Many of us feel that teams are fundamental to the way we work—but what aspects of the team process are essential to our practice? Questions from practitioners in the field tackle this ongoing concern, while Paul Orselli tries to get us out of “team-think,” if just for a moment, and Jim Volkert suggests ways to break out of rigid team roles.

Paul Martin, Claire Pillsbury, Robert Garfinkle, and Susan Koch grapple with the age-old complaint that there is never enough time and money allocated for exhibit development projects. Judy Rand and Stephen Pizzey deal with the question of whether interactivity is *really* the most essential quality of a science exhibition experience. Donald Hughes and Sue Allen ask us to consider what aspects of evaluation are indispensable for exhibit development and what aspects may actually hinder the creative process. Should we strive

for innovation for its own sake? Amanda Parkes encourages us to be more discriminating when we consider the use of innovative technologies in exhibit development. Sue Allen calls for a program of research that focuses on the physical learning environment. And I complete the section with some thoughts about ideas in exhibitions.

Some of these provocations are tongue-in-cheek, some are heartfelt questions, and some are exaggerations employed to make a point. All are intended to push us toward new ways of thinking about our practice.

—Kathleen McLean

#### References and Resources

- Blackmon, Carolyn P., Teresa K. LaMaster, Lisa C. Roberts, and Beverly Serrell. *Open Conversations: Strategies for Professional Development in Museums*. Chicago: Field Museum of Natural History, 1988.
- Schon, Donald A. *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. New York: Perseus Books, 1990.