

Creating Effective & Engaging History Exhibits

By Dean Krimmel

There's certainly no formula for success when it comes to developing great history exhibits. Defining greatness, or success, for that matter, isn't a bad way to begin the planning process. The following list of ideas and suggestions are neither comprehensive nor exhaustive, but rather are intended as food for thought for both the experienced exhibit developer and newcomer to the field. If you have sage advice of our own, please drop me a line for the next version of this exhibit development checklist.

All the Gallery's a Stage: Think of your exhibit galleries as performance spaces and dramatic settings. But in this case, the crowd does all or most of the acting. The challenge is to figure out what you want visitors TO DO in the exhibit and then create an experience that allows them to behave accordingly—while allowing for the unpredictable and spontaneous. Be creative; think in terms of metaphors.

Signature Graphics: Look for dramatic photographs, prints and paintings that capture the essence of an era or exhibit theme. Signature graphics are visual knockouts that grab us because of their rich detail, complexity, composition or poignancy.

Tell a Story: What do great films, novels, plays, and historical accounts have in common? I'll bet you'll agree that their storylines are driven by dramatic events and human action (and reaction). Can people and events propel your exhibit storyline?

Create a Working Timeline: Creating a working timeline (one you add to constantly during your research phase) helps you assemble information in a useable format, and then analyze that information to identify patterns, themes, events and people that make your exhibit storyline distinctive. Some version of the timeline might also end up on your gallery walls. A good timeline raises important questions—Why did this happen then? What was the response?—about its subject, forcing us to separate the trivial from the significant.

Biography Sells: Even those who profess hatred for “History” can be hooked by stories that highlight individuals and families. Personalize the past and remember that millions of people turn to biographies to learn their history.

Humor Us: Exhibit text works best when it is presented in informal language. Humor works, as does plain, direct language.

Speak to Me: Use quotations from a range of primary sources to create a sense of immediacy, intimacy, excitement and drama. Quotations tell visitors that they are learning about the past—hearing voices—from many perspectives, not just the official museum-curator voice. Look for descriptive, vivid, evocative and telling passages in company publications, newspapers, correspondence, diaries, travelers’ accounts, business reports. Gather the material first, without worrying about length. Edit later to fit the use. Use quotations on walls, in large thematic labels, artifact and graphics captions, on handouts and in press material.

Ask Questions: Visitors learn when you ask them questions, provided you give them the answers. There are many fun ways to do so, including the creation of simple interactive flip books or a disc on panel game. The activities that work best are those that look and feel appropriate to the exhibit design and interpretive themes.

Repetition is okay: Don’t hesitate to repeat important ideas, themes, concepts or information—perhaps with a slight twist. A little repetition will serve as a useful reinforcement rather than an irritant. Few, if any, visitors look at and read everything in an exhibit; those who do are savvy enough to ignore something they’ve already seen—and digested.

Give ‘em the Scoop: Reward your visitor by taking them into your confidence--give them the “scoop” on your topic, send them away with some inside info that they can share with a friend. Kids, especially, love the idea of mastering arcane knowledge. Trivia is useless, inside info has integrity of its own.

Build in a Sense of Ownership: The inclusion of some sort of talk back or feedback station is now de riger in museums, especially in history exhibits. That doesn’t mean it isn’t worthwhile, provided it has some integrity. The best feedback concepts have an obvious connection to, and often extend, the exhibit’s big idea—while allowing visitors to learn from one another.

Maps Work: Use maps to orient visitors (the past truly is a foreign country as historian David Lowenthal said), reinforce broad exhibit themes, and allow visitors to make their own connections beyond the exhibit. Good maps are visually interesting and loaded with information.

Create some Mystery: If you have an historical jewel, fragile original document, or artifact, consider placing it in its own exhibit case covered by fabric or by some other means. You will heighten visitor anticipation and highlight the item’s rarity and importance while protecting it from light. But don’t fool yourself. Make sure the item will live up to its billing.

Audio is Cheap: Ambient sound and ambient music are wonderful ways to evoke or reinforce moods in exhibits. Sound also will enliven an otherwise empty gallery--but it is guaranteed to drive nearby staff absolutely crazy. I’m a fan of audio stations, and other audio programs, that allow us to introduce additional voices (e.g., new or old oral history interviews).

Video is Expected: Video productions aren't cheap, but they have become standard fare in exhibits. So visitors do expect to see something when they come. If you can do it (look for something canned), and it's appropriate, fine; otherwise, look for other ways (e.g., audio, interactives) to engage and enthrall your visitors.

A New Coat of Paint: Paint is cheap! A fresh coat of paint, and/or variety of color, is an effective way to enliven space, evoke moods, and differentiate one gallery from another.

Benches are Beautiful: How many people cut short their visit because they grow tired of looking, doing things, and learning while on their feet? Well-placed benches and comfortable seating areas not only provide personal comfort and prolong the overall visit, they also allow people who are less interested in a given exhibit or display to break away, leaving others in their party more guilt-free time for exploring.