

Creating an Exhibit Plan

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What is it, and why do it?

An Exhibit Plan is a clear and concise planning document that describes your project goals, core or target audiences, desired visitor experience, exhibit content and resources, timeline and budget, and in some cases, audience research needs, collecting needs and conservation considerations.

An Exhibit Plan is created by an exhibit team during what many call a pre-design, or interpretive planning, phase—the time before you hire an exhibition design firm. A well-developed plan is an indispensable tool for all subsequent planning and design work, beginning with the creation of a Request for Proposal for design services. And, the experience of producing a plan imposes discipline and focus on an exhibit team, nurtures an audience-centered, outcome-oriented exhibit philosophy, and prepares everyone for the rigorous work ahead.

What's it look like?

I. Overview/Background

1. Description of exhibit, e.g., type/duration, opening date, budget.
2. Location & square footage; floor plan of space.
3. Names and titles/roles of exhibit team members.
4. (Optional) Additional notes on planning process.

II. Institutional & Exhibit Team Goals

1. Museum mission and vision statement.
2. Institutional Goals (often aligned with a Strategic Plan): How will the exhibit support the museum's broader, long term goals?
3. Exhibit Team Goals: What does each team member hope to get out of the process, professionally and personally?

III. Core/Target Audiences

1. Description of audiences and key constituents/stakeholders and, briefly, what we know about them, e.g., needs, interests, expectations, level of knowledge, best ways of engaging.
2. (Optional) Initial thoughts about audience research needs.

IV. The Visitor Experience

1. Statement of exhibition philosophy; guiding principles for visitor experience (sometimes found in a Strategic Plan/Framework).
2. Do-Know-Feel: What the exhibit team expects will happen in the galleries, and after visitors leave.

V. Exhibit Content & Collections

1. Exhibit Outline: The “big idea,” major interpretive themes, key messages, topics/storylines, key artifacts/graphics.
2. Visitor Walk-Throughs: Brief written descriptions of a walk through your exhibit told from the perspective of different target audiences.
3. (Optional) Collection Notes: Notes on other notable holdings, e.g., media, oral history; collecting needs; conservation considerations.

How do I use my Exhibit Plan?

- **To create ownership, internally and externally:** Think of the plan as your formal statement of purpose. Use it to educate colleagues, the board, volunteers, stakeholders, the media—making sure that you provide them with the necessary explanation and context.
- **To inform the design RFP:** Much, if not all, of the plan will form the bulk of the RFP for design services. Some reformatting might be necessary.
- **To guide audience research:** Use the sections relating to goals, audience and visitor experience to create an audience research & evaluation plan (including front-end research and documentation of your audiences).
- **To begin the exhibit script:** The content outline forms the basis for your exhibit script and will immediately begin its evolution from conceptual framework to fully fleshed-out script.