

Designing the Visitor Experience

By Dean Krimmel

Envisioning the visitor experience goes hand in hand with developing the exhibit content and design. Exhibits that address visitors' expectations, needs, and interests make a lasting impression. Here are some things to keep in mind during the exhibit development process.

A. First, give 'em what they want and need: A Visitor's Bill of Rights

From Judy Rand, "The 227-Mile Museum, or a Visitor's Bill of Rights,"

Curator: The Museum Journal 44/1 (January 2000): 7-14.

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| 1. Comfort | Meet my basic needs |
| 2. Orientation | Make it easy for me to find my way around |
| 3. Welcome/Belonging | Make me feel welcome |
| 4. Enjoyment | I want to have fun |
| 5. Socializing | I came to spend time with family and friends |
| 6. Respect | Accept me for who I am and what I know |
| 7. Communication | Help me understand, and let me talk, too |
| 8. Learning | I want to learn something new |
| 9. Choice and Control | Let me choose; give me some control |
| 10. Challenge & Confidence | Give me a challenge I know I can handle |
| 11. Revitalization | Help me leave refreshed and restored |

B. Create conditions for learning: Six Rules to Live By

From George L. Hein's *Learning in the Museum* (Routledge, 1998).

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| 1. Control | Give visitors have a sense of self-determination and control |
| 2. Confidence | Give visitors have a sense of competence |
| 3. Curiosity | Find ways to surprise and intrigue visitors |
| 4. Challenge | Help visitors perceive something to work towards |
| 5. Communication | Encourage visitors to engage in meaningful social interaction |
| 6. Play | Build in elements of sensory enjoyment and playfulness |

C. Beware of unrealistic expectations: Hein's Caveats

From George L. Hein's *Learning in the Museum* (Routledge, 1998)

1. Exhibits function best when they relate to visitors' prior interests.
2. Complex and difficult concept exhibitions get visitors' awe and respect, but not comprehension.
3. Effective communication of knowledge, as distinct from creating an experience, is a very difficult task within the museum situation.

D. Put Yourself in their Shoes: A Visitor Motivation Model

From John Falk & Beverly Sheppard's *Thriving in the Knowledge Age* (Altamira Press, 2006): 90ff.

<u>Visitor "Mindset"</u>	<u>Their visit is motivated, mainly, by</u>
<i>Explorer</i>	Personal curiosity and general interest
<i>Facilitator</i>	Desire to do something for someone else, often children
<i>Experience Seeker</i>	Desire to do something new; to "collect" experiences
<i>Recharger</i>	Enjoyment of contemplative and rejuvenating activities
<i>Hobbyist/Pro</i>	Curiosity about presentation/technique, less about new info
<i>Draggee*</i>	Those who are dragged along, sometimes kicking and screaming... (*Category added by Dale Jones)

E. Remember, it's leisure time: Why people don't visit museums

From Marilyn G. Hood, "Staying Away: Why People Choose Not to Visit Museums," *Museum News* (April 1983): 50-57.

Marilyn Hood pointed out back in the 1980s that many people do NOT visit museums for the following reasons. While times have certainly changed, what can we do to continue reshaping people's perceptions of museums?

1. Museums don't give me the opportunity to interact with my companions.
2. Museums are not comfortable settings, places that make me feel at ease.
3. A museum visit does not feel like something that's worthwhile to do.
4. Museums do not give me the challenge of new experiences.
5. Museums do not give me the opportunity to actively participate.

F. Mickey's "Ten Commandments"

Adapted from Kathleen McLean's *Planning for People in Museum Exhibitions* (1993).

1. **Know your audience:** Don't bore people by talking down to them, or lose them by assuming they have greater knowledge than in fact they do.
2. **Wear your guests' shoes:** Have everyone involved with exhibit development to experience the facility from a visitor's perspective—as often as possible.
3. **Avoid overload; create turn-ons:** Resist the temptation to tell people too much, to plaster exhibits with too many text panels and verbal descriptions. People



don't have to learn everything there is to know about a subject at that very moment.

4. **For every ounce of treatment, provide a ton of fun—a ton of treat:** Many other temptations vie for our leisure time. So, give people opportunities to enjoy themselves and participate in the experience. Make your environment a rich one that appeals to all the senses. That does not necessarily mean entertainment.
5. **Organize the flow of people and ideas:** Give people sequenced stories, not lectures. Use good storytelling techniques to organize and present your information. Use lots of graphics and good signage. Do everything you can to improve visitors' orientation and avoid confusion.
6. **Tell me one story at a time:** Divide your information into distinct, logical, organized stories. This allows people to understand and absorb one concept before moving on to the next.
7. **Create a *wienie*:** Come up with ways and things that will lead visitors from one area to the next—visual magnets that reward people walking from point A to point B.
8. **Communicate with visual literacy:** Make good use of all the nonverbal ways of communicating with people: color, shape and form are our most powerful communication and storytelling tools.
9. **Avoid contradictions; maintain your identity:** A clear identity helps give you a competitive edge. The public needs to know who you are and what differentiates you from other institutions they may have seen.
10. **Keep it up:** Never underestimate the importance of cleanliness and routine maintenance.

*Do you have any advice for those of us
who want to design a great visitor experience?
Drop me a line.*