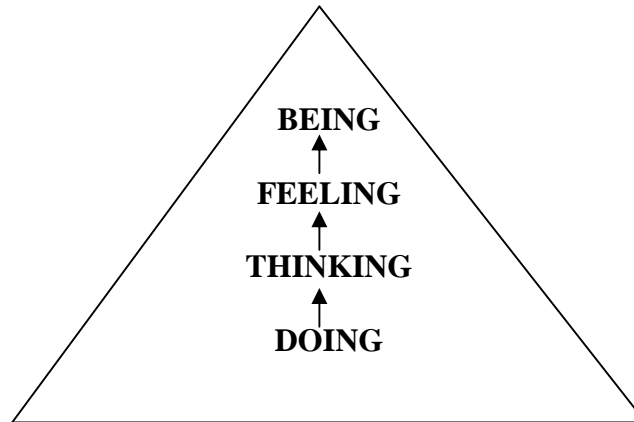


Museum Experience Hierarchy

By John Durel

The museum guest experience should be designed so that the base of this triangle supports the higher levels.



BEING: The beliefs and values that are affirmed and reinforced by the experience.

FEELING: The emotions that are evoked by the experience.

THINKING: The information that is presented and learned during the experience.

DOING: The actions taken by the guest during the experience.

At the base is everything that the guest does: walks through an exhibit, examines an object, reads a label, listens to an audio presentation, talks to an historical interpreter, watches an actor, talks with a friend, has lunch in the café, buys a souvenir, and so forth.

These actions should enable the guest to discover and learn new information and concepts. These learning should be congruent with the emotions that are evoked by the information and by the way in which the information is presented. The emotions should, in turn, reinforce deeply held values and beliefs.

For example, imagine a guest standing in an environment that evokes a WWII battleground, listening to the actual words of a particular soldier and looking at a display of items carried by a typical soldier. The guest learns specific information about the soldier's experience on the battlefield; feels a mix of empathy, pride and unease; and leaves the experience reflecting that personal sacrifice to preserve freedom is not easy, but sometimes is necessary.

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One cannot guarantee that all guests will have this kind of experience. However, designing the guest experience (or more accurately, an array of experiences) with this construct in mind increases the odds that most guests will experience the exhibit in this way.

The guest moves from the base of the triangle to the top. Designing the experience, on the other hand, starts at the top and moves downward. Thus, the first task is to identify the core values or beliefs that you want to affirm. There should be three or four fundamental values to guide everyone's thinking as they plan the experience. A small group of smart people who are really committed to the project should go through a process of discovering why this work is important. This process of discovery should not be superficial; it should go deep into the hearts of the participants. This will reveal the core values inherent in the project.

The core values apply to the entire guest experience: from the marketing brochure that the guest first sees, to the souvenir purchased on the way out. That is, the values should inform all decisions that will impact the guest's experience.

Once the values are identified and clearly stated, this small group can then consider the range of emotions that may support the values. If there are 3 or 4 values, there may be a dozen or more emotions; and whereas the values shape every experience, the emotions can be divided among the experiences. Thus, humor may be used in one place, and empathy in another. In identifying a range of emotions, take into account the reality that people often have mixed feelings about their experiences.

Once the core values and range of emotions are identified, turn to subject experts to select the intellectual content of the exhibit:

1. Major themes and sub-themes.
2. Stories that capture the themes and sub-themes.
3. Objects, images, and documents that help to tell the stories.
4. Environments and other display methods that help to tell the stories.

This should be an iterative process, moving through steps 1 to 4, and then back through the steps, each time becoming more specific. For example, initially you may select a theme for which you cannot find just the right objects, but the objects you do have suggest a variation on the theme. This might lead you to look for different stories, and so forth.

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Ultimately this iterative process should yield an array of guest experiences, centered on stories, rich in material content, presenting accurate information within historical themes, evoking emotional responses, and reinforcing core values.

By taking this approach to designing guest experiences, museums will produce more engaging and more meaningful exhibits. Instead of beginning with what guests will see and do, first consider what they believe and what they will feel. It is at the level of “being” and “feeling” that you really *connect* with your guests. This will result in a better experience for them, one that is likely to lead them to become loyal supporters of your museum.