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Your Ideal Exhibit Designer

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August 2013

I recently asked a group of curators, directors, educators, and interpretive planners what they look for in an exhibit designer. What, I wanted to know, makes some designers outstanding — that is, what skills, talents and expertise do they most value?

Here's a summary of the ten responses I received (of 34 people queried).

Much of it might seem familiar, even predictable. Which is okay. The real value of this exercise, for me, is that it gives you a set of qualities and characteristics that can, really should, inform the process for selecting an exhibit designer. At the very least, it should spark a conversation about what you're looking for — often bringing to light people's misconceptions about designers and the design process.

I hope you find this useful and thought-provoking. Got something to add? Please drop me a line. This is an on-going effort of mine, part of a large project that includes asking exhibit designers what qualities they look for in a museum client. From my vantage point, straddling these two worlds, I still see a heck of a lot of confusion and misunderstanding about how the other side operates.

Thanks, again, to everyone who shared their thoughts.

The Seasoned Professional

- **Good Design Skills:** Creativity; meticulous attention to detail; obsessive about the details of the installation; skill with text design and ability to recognize words as integral to overall design so they don't end up looking like books on a wall; avoids both the formulaic and the newest and greatest thing; swiftness in creating results under deadline.
- **Versed in Architectural/Space Planning:** architectural background and sophisticated understanding of how to shape the space to enhance the exhibition experience; knowledge of architectural design programs for production of exhibition schematics; ability to create dynamic, inventive spaces by using architectural design and graphic techniques.
- **Always Conscious of Budgets & Deadlines:** ability to create a realistic budget and timetable that can be implemented in phases if needed; ability to work within budgets; ability to meet deadlines and work within budget; someone who considers the long-term maintenance of the exhibit



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- Knows the Standards: Familiarity with conservation concerns regarding objects and techniques used for display, including mounts; familiarity with ADA requirements for installations; current in museum practices, technology.
- Proven Track Record: Solid experience and strong recommendations; experience with a range of different types of projects

A True Collaborator

- Passionate Partner: Someone who brings a high level of passion for the project—and who brings lots of energy; someone deeply engaged with the exhibition topic; someone willing to join the process at a very early stage; someone who pushes us to get to a higher level.
- Great Listener: Willingness and ability to engage with the curator's and/or exhibition team's vision; a designer that listens and gives you more than the standard “thing they do” (Many designers do one thing and it's their thing.); willingness to listen to OUR ideas and respond to change; someone who listens to the client and understands the story they are trying to tell; flexibility and openness to curatorial suggestions; eagerness to engage in discussion and debate about exhibition design, to brainstorm; sensitivity to the subject matter.
- Team Player: Works within project parameters; ability to work cooperatively with multiple staff members and contractors; produces what the client wants and what is best/easiest for the client to maintain; views design as means to support project goals and not a means unto itself (working for project, not to make a big design statement. produces what the client wants and what is best/easiest for the client to maintain; willingness to be hands-on during installation

The Right “Fit”

- Good Chemistry: Personal compatibility is key; someone my staff can work with; sense of humor and playfulness that makes the design process fun.
- “Fits” our Needs: Someone who “fits” the needs of the specific exhibition and aligns well with the rest of the project team (credentials and experience demonstrate competence, so does the project call for someone who is great with photography, great with type, or great with architectural space? Someone more tuned in to content? Someone who brings great energy or imagination to round out the team?); someone who is affordable.



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An Alternate View: *Who I Avoid*

One respondent described “What I am not looking for,” which for me is instructive only after I invert the negatives to come up with a positive.

The “Artist”

The artist does not play well with others. He/she believes that deadlines and budgets are for lesser mortals. When the artist grows attached to an idea they cannot be easily unglued – these ideas usually involved curved walls or lots of etched glass.

The “Theorist”

The theorist is a closet curator, frustrated by the limitations of being a designer. If after six months you are still discussing the bubble diagram, you know you are dealing with a theorist. The theorist doesn’t understand why they would be asked to start designing before the research is complete.

The “Accountant”

Unlike the artist and the theorist, invoices from the accountant will be easy to follow. And that’s the best that can be said of them. The accountant feels that unless creativity was specified in the contract it isn’t required. They sit quietly at progress meetings waiting for the moment when two or more client team members disagree – then, rather than trying to reconcile the problem with a design solution – gleefully declare, “get back to us when you have resolved this.”

The “Illustrator”

The illustrator is very uncomfortable with artifacts, dimensional space and interactives. Their first instinct is “let’s have a timeline”, their second is “that’s complicated so let’s make it a video”. The illustrator would find it easier to work on the companion book or website – exhibits are just too messy.