

Exhibit Makeovers: A Do-It-Yourself Workbook for Small Museums by Alice Parman and Jeffrey Jane Flowers.

Reviewed by Lisa Eriksen

In the museum profession, we are blessed with a wealth of thought-provoking publications providing brilliant theoretical assessment of our field, advocating for best practices, and providing us opportunities to ponder the societal value of our work. If you are like me, you have a stack of these books at your bedside waiting for the few minutes of reading time before sleep.

Not quite so numerous, but equally significant, are books that provide concise “how to” guidance to accomplish specific tasks with thoughtfulness and purpose—in this instance to create better exhibitions. ***Exhibit Makeovers: A Do-It-Yourself Workbook for Small Museums*** by Alice Parman and Jeffrey Jane Flowers is a practical guide to improving the content and look of existing exhibitions. While geared to people new to the museum field, volunteers, and staff at smaller institutions, ***Exhibit Makeovers*** is also a useful resource for professionals in larger museums. This is not a book for the bedside table, but one to keep on your desk as a primer on the steps of exhibition development.

Delving into the book, I wondered if ***Exhibit Makeovers*** would apply only to an existing exhibition or if the lessons can be used for new exhibition development. I was working on a new exhibition myself and having this review of strategies was enlightening as well as practical. Each section includes helpful worksheets to guide readers through the exhibition development process. Worksheets help the exhibition team conceptualize goals and develop specific outcomes—from reviewing the museum’s mission, to developing take-home messages, to estimating costs for types of exhibitions. While not having time to use the worksheets in the book, I kept in mind the

concepts from ***Exhibit Makeovers*** as I organized our institution’s team through the exhibition development process.

A Format that Builds on Itself

The authors state that successful exhibitions are created through “thoughtful planning, energetic execution, and a spirit of openness and collaboration.” The book is organized in three parts, outlining incrementally challenging exhibition work.

Exhibit Makeovers starts with a straightforward introduction describing the definition of a makeover and why small museums, defined by limited funding and few, if any, staff, need to prepare for and take on this important work. Parman and Flowers stress the importance of viewing your museum and exhibitions through the visitors’ eyes, and they outline three critical touchstones in the introduction: mission, main message, and budget.

In the “Starting Small” section, readers begin with the basics of developing a storyline for a single-case exhibit. As a former director of a small museum, I question the advisability of including a board member in the development team unless there is a compelling reason. Often leadership of small institutions is challenged to keep trustees focused on their governance role, so one must clarify that serving on an exhibit team is a separate undertaking from board duties. I also disagree that you only need a team of in-house people for this first phase. Even a small case update is an opportunity to build community partnerships and to encourage the involvement of outside experts.

Worksheets in “Starting Small” define storyline ideas and help the exhibit team

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outline important facts and juicy stories for the single-case makeover. The exercises extend to organizing themes and helping the team consider multiple viewpoints. Many practical suggestions are offered, such as keeping fonts to a minimum and taking digital images of groupings. While all of the worksheets are helpful in brainstorming and planning, one tiny improvement could be in the layout where some worksheets are too small to be useful in the exercises described. This section would also benefit from a worksheet on creating a plan of work to outline tasks and keeping the project on schedule.

The second part of *Exhibit Makeovers* builds on the skills described in the exhibit case section and provides guidance on developing a larger team to renovate an entire museum gallery. There are warm up exercises to help get creative juices flowing, and chapters in this section refer to worksheets in part one and add new tools. The authors also provide information on accessibility and conservation timelines. The final chapters in this part provide details on design, typography, color, as well as fabrication, mounts, and installation.

The final part of the book focuses on making over the entire museum through community involvement. While the presentation of stages in the exhibit development process makes sense

for a book, it is unlikely that many museums would be able to follow these steps sequentially. I would like to see more integration of community involvement in the previous two parts of the book. Yet the “Involve Your Community” section provides a strong focus on the visitor and includes summaries of Howard Gardner’s research on Multiple Intelligences and ADA requirements. This section might have been strengthened with more detail on evaluation, and the information on developing a budget could benefit from more specifics. After working in and with small museums for more than a decade, I know practitioners want specifics on costs and funding. But these are small critiques on a comprehensive and useful resource for museums that want to improve their exhibition offerings.

A Useful Tool for Museums Large and Small

It is not only important for small museums to reinvent themselves and remain relevant and engaging to their communities – today it is vital for their survival. While the title of *Exhibit Makeovers: A Do-It-Yourself Workbook for Small Museums* is as playful and creative as its content, this book is a serious resource for small, and not so small, museums—institutions that now must continually refresh their services to remain vital and valued by the makeover-obsessed public. ✨