

Standards for Museum Exhibitions and Indicators of Excellence

Developed by the Standing Professional Committees Council of the American Association of Museums

INTRODUCTION

Exhibitions are the public face of museums. The effective presentation of collections and information in exhibitions is an activity unique to museums, and it is through their exhibitions that the vast majority of people know museums.

Museum exhibitions are complex, and even modest ones require the time, energy, and expertise of many people. Museums now realize that effective planning, management of resources, research and interpretation, collections care, marketing, merchandising, design and fabrication, public programs, publications, and fund raising all contribute to the fulfillment of a museum's mission. However, it is vital that we as a profession not lose sight of the importance of the exhibition in its own right.

STANDARDS FOR MUSEUM EXHIBITIONS

An exhibition is successful if it is physically, intellectually, and emotionally engaging to those who experience it. What follows is an outline of exhibition features that generally result in success. A competent exhibit need not demonstrate all of these features. The outline should be viewed as suggestive rather than precisely prescriptive. In fact, there is little that can be--or should be prescriptive about good exhibition design. We should always allow for purposeful--and often brilliant--deviation from the norm.

The following standards for museum exhibitions are organized in six major categories followed by descriptions of what constitutes effectiveness for each category and a listing of specific ways the category might be expressed in an exhibition.

1. Audience awareness

Did the audience respond well to the exhibition, and was the response consistent with the exhibition's goals?

Some specific ways this standard is achieved and demonstrated are:

- There is convincing evidence that the exhibition achieved its purpose(s) for its intended audiences and/or there is convincing evidence that the exhibition

surpassed its intended goal(s) and resulted in unanticipated, positive experiences for visitors.

- Decisions about content, means of expression, and design are based on decisions about the intended audience.
- Visitors are given information in a variety of formats to accommodate various needs and preferences. If not, why not?
- The exhibition is designed to accommodate those who wish to skim as well as those who wish to take more time. If not, why not?

2. Content

Does the exhibition respect the integrity of its content?

Some specific ways this standard is achieved and demonstrated are:

- Subject is appropriate to an exhibition format, with its use of collections, environments, phenomena, and other means of physical presentation of content.
- Significant ideas, based on appropriate authority, are clearly expressed through reference to objects in the exhibition.
- The content reflects current knowledge of the subject.
- The subject is of current interest or the exhibition contributes to creating interest in a subject of importance.
- There are a sufficient number of objects to present the subject of the exhibition.

3. Collections

Have conservation and security matters been appropriately addressed?

Some specific ways this standard is achieved and demonstrated are:

- Objects are mounted appropriately.
- The requirements of good conservation (light levels, climate control) and security are met.

4. Interpretation/Communication

Is the information/message of the exhibition clear and coherent? If not, is there a good reason why not?

Some specific ways this standard is achieved and demonstrated are:

- The exhibition title communicates the subject and sounds appealing.
- There is a clear idea or set of ideas expressed, and those ideas are clear to viewers.
- There is a discernible pattern to the way content is presented, and if not, there is a good reason why not.
- There are coherent, easy-to-follow, and consistent formats for presenting information and eliciting responses, and if not, there is a good reason why not.
- Assumptions and points-of-view are clearly identified. If appropriate to the subject matter, the exhibition need not provide definitive answers. Raising questions and providing a forum for ideas may suffice.
- Specific topics and individual objects are treated in a manner appropriate to their importance.
- Interpretive media (labels, lighting, interactives, video, etc.) are appropriate to the exhibition's goals, content, and intended audiences.
- The exhibition is engaging. Efforts are made to make the subject matter come alive through attractive presentation and opportunities for establishing personal connections and meaning.

5. Design and production

Are the media employed and the means used to present them in spatial planning, design, and physical presentation appropriate to the exhibition's theme, subject matter, collection, and audiences?

Some specific ways this standard is achieved and demonstrated are:

- Design elements (i.e. color, lights graphic treatments, exhibit furniture) contribute to and support the exhibition's ideas and tone.
- Orientation at the start and throughout the exhibition provides visitors with a conceptual, physical, and affective overview of the exhibition. Spatial organization supports the exhibition's organization.
- Traffic patterns are obvious to visitors and support the exhibition's sequencing of information and experiences. If not, there is a good reason why not.

- For each element of the exhibition (furnishings, audio-visuals, sound, printed materials, graphics), the materials used and the quality of production are appropriate to the design concept audiences, duration, and budget of the exhibition.

6. Ergonomics: Human comfort, safety, and accessibility

Is the exhibition physically accessible? Are visitors comfortable and safe while viewing the exhibition?

Some specific ways this standard is achieved and demonstrated are:

- If the exhibition includes any potentially troubling material, visitors are forewarned so they can make informed decisions about whether they want to see it.
- Instructions are given when needed; they are clear and easy to understand.
- There is seating, as appropriate.
- Labels are engaging, informative, legible, and easily understood.
- The exhibition is fully accessible to all its visitors, and the needs of all potential visitors are addressed.

INDICATORS OF EXCELLENCE IN MUSEUM EXHIBITIONS

While many exhibitions achieve a competent level of professionalism, each year there are a few exhibitions that achieve excellence by surpassing standards of practice in scholarship interpretation, and/or design or by introducing innovations that stretch the boundaries of accepted practice. Such exhibitions are highly distinguished and serve as models of the capacity of museum exhibitions to provide transforming experiences visitors so often attribute to them.

Some specific indicators of exhibition excellence are:

- An aspect of the exhibition is innovative.
- The exhibition offers a new perspective or new insight on a topic.
- The exhibition presents new information.
- The exhibition synthesizes and presents existing knowledge and/or collection materials in a provocative way.

- The exhibition includes innovative uses of media, materials, and other design elements.

- The exhibition is particularly beautiful, exceptionally capable of engendering a personal, emotional response, and/or profoundly memorable in a constructive way.

- The exhibition evokes responses from viewers that are evidence of a transforming experience. Such experiences are often characterized in these ways: It was haunting.

The exhibition was an absolute eye-opener.

I'll never see XXX in the same way again.

I was filled with excitement.

It knocked my socks off

It sent shivers down my spine.

I finally got it!