Illustration by Jennie Alwood Zehmer

What Is an "Exhibit Developer"?

by Sharyn Horowitz and Katherine Krile

"It's time to acknowledge that from the audience's point of view, the exhibit designer's role is the single most important role in creating an exhibit... An exhibit has its best chance for success, measured by whatever communication goals you wish to set, when the creative effort to bring a topic to an audience is led by an exhibit designer. The designer is often the only person on the team who is able to conceptually understand, organize, and integrate both the physical and intellectual content of an exhibit at all phases of the exhibit's development, design, and production."

—Don Hughes, "Growing up NAME," Exhibitionist, spring 1996

Substitute the word developer for designer in the above paragraph and many exhibit developers would nod wisely. Is there a problem here?

In search of what it means to be an exhibit developer in today's museum-exhibit-making community, we approached a range of people in the profession.

First on our list was Michael Spock, since the role and job title "Exhibit Developer" seems to have originated at the Children's Museum in Boston during his tenure there in the early 1970s. When he first came to the Museum there was "a tripartite model of curator, designer, and advocate for the visitor, who was either an educator or an evaluator." There was a general feeling on staff that something wasn't right with this model. Educators, he observed, excel at direct interpersonal interaction, but the exhibits process kept educators one step removed from the public. Evaluators, on the other hand, were too specialized; not necessarily skilled in working through the exhibit development process. He and his staff felt that while both of these parties are important to a successful exhibition, neither one really fulfilled the needs of the exhibition team. A new team player—the exhibit developer—was born to fulfill this need.

According to Spock, an exhibit developer is equally passionate about the content and about the visitor and has some sense of how to put exhibitions together. Exhibit developers should know the content but not be so buried in it that they can't keep their perspective.

Has this early model of an exhibit developer changed? We spoke with several other people to find out.

Phyllis Rabineau, Deputy Director for Interpretation and Education, Chicago Historical Society

"I always thought the developer's job was to identify and orchestrate resources—i.e. visitors (accessed through evaluation), the collection, and curators and other scholars—to create an effective public learning experience. Today, for cultural projects I'd add the constituency, i.e. the people whose culture or history is the subject of the exhibit.

The developer has to find the main ideas, think of some materials that can be used to express them, and bring these into a collaborative design process. Developers aren't responsible for figuring out how to deliver the message—that's the designer's expertise—but they have to decide what the message should be. Designers are often frustrated by developers, particularly if the developers are fuzzy in their thinking or miss their deadlines. Yes, these are crimes of which developers are often guilty!

It's a lot harder for people to understand what a developer does than it is to understand the role of curator or designer. Not only do you find exhibit developers lurking under all kinds of titles from one institution to the next, you also find many different expectations about what a developer is and does. Sometimes the title of 'developer' appears to be given to the project coordinator or to an interpretive writer.

Under Mike Spock's leadership at the Field Museum, the exhibit developer was not only responsible for the content of the exhibit, s/he was also the project director. The reason for this was that Mike saw the developer as the primary advocate for the audience, and he wanted the projects to be rigorously 'client-centered.' The most important issue was always, 'How will this work for the visitor?'

Marquette Folley-Cooper, Project Director, Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES), Washington, D.C.

"An exhibit developer believes firmly in the art of collaboration. Like a conductor who works with trumpet players, saxophonists, and other musicians to create long moments of magic, an exhibit developer relies on individuals with different talents to tell an honest and intelligent human story.

An exhibit developer must learn how to stay with the vision for an exhibition. The message developed by the team at the beginning becomes the exhibit developer's mandate. Collaboration with others leads to a refinement of that vision. Within a climate of mutual respect fostered by the exhibit developer, nearly every idea has a place in that process, even if it is to wonder about the genesis of the idea. The act of answering allows the idea to test itself."

Jennifer Thissen, Project Director, Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES), Washington, D.C.
"Exhibit developers seem to me a lot like film producers, ensuring that everyone on a project has the information, resources, and intellectual environment necessary to craft a work of art. They must be acutely aware of the goals of the curator and other collaborators, the needs and interests of museum visitors, and find ways to forge a link between these groups.

Probably the most critical period in creating an effective exhibition team is the "brain dump." This is the curator's opportunity to educate the exhibition team on the topic, and for the team to respond with questions and ideas for the exhibition. This process not only informs the team about the subject but also introduces the curator to the possibilities and limitations of museum exhibitions.

When an exhibit developer has done her job well, the exhibition team can make the best possible use of their creativity and expertise."

**Karoline Lane, Exhibit Developer, Gerard Hilferty and Associates, Athens, Ohio**

"Exhibit developers are conceptual designers—what is the information the client wants to get across? How is that information best shaped for communication? And how can we successfully communicate that information through exhibits?"

There's very little difference between an exhibit developer and an excellent exhibit designer. The biggest difference may be that we don't draw. We're also like evaluators because we have to know, for whom is this exhibit? But we depend on evaluators' expertise in gathering information and tweaking our work. We're also like curators, because we've got to become mini-subject-experts.

Working with big teams, everybody does a little bit of everything. All our efforts seem to overlap, but we all have something we're especially good at: aesthetics, materials, function (designers); scholarship (curators); visitor identity and biases (evaluators). All of us are concerned with communication, but perhaps that's the thing developers are especially good at.

As developers, we have to understand the medium, the possibilities of the medium; what it will and will not do. And I think we have a responsibility to help our clients understand. Ultimately it's about communication. To visitors. To clients. To in-house team members. It's up to us to see both the forest and the trees. And to have the skills (and patience) to bring an exhibit from concept to reality."

**Stephanie Ratcliffe, Senior Exhibits Specialist, Maryland Science Center, Baltimore, Md.**

"Exhibit developers at my institution wear many different hats, taking them on and off at different points in the process: team facilitator, translator, broker of information, evaluator, project manager.

You're often the one who synthesizes the team's ideas into writing, so you have to figure out how to get the information you need out of the group. You bring your own ideas, but you must also tap into all perspectives on the team. Documents you produce must represent "group think" or you will run into many problems later. It is important that the team trust you to communicate the group's collective vision.

You may also be the one who gets to know the subject matter best, and you're probably the liaison to outside content experts. In this role, you have to translate the sometimes complex information for the visitors. Even before that, though, you often need to synthesize an immense amount of information for the rest of the team.

Traditionally here, the developers have been responsible for formative evaluation. But designers are participating too. It's good for the designers to see with their own eyes how visitors react to the prototypes, but it's right that the developer is the primary champion for the visitors.

In our process, you might be the project manager at the beginning, but at a certain time the ball gets handed to the designers. But still you're part project manager, in that you manage the editorial aspects. You're responsible for creating enough of the script and for making key decisions to keep everyone else on track. When there's a problem, you do the things you need to do to get the team unstuck, whether it's interpersonal or content-related.

In my case, I'm working with a team that's been together for a long time, so these issues have shaken themselves out. But defining roles is part of the rules of the game, and the definitions may change because of lessons from other projects. I've found it useful (and entertaining) to read and learn more about team process. Most of these models come from the business world. It is both frightening and funny to realize how predictable people can be when presented certain tasks. A recent reference I have found useful is *The Wisdom of Teams*, by Ron J. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith.

**Darcie Fohrman, independent consultant, Monterey, Calif.**

"I don't really know the definition of an exhibit developer. It's very important to have people on the team that are professional exhibit planners that understand how to be the liaison to the public. I'd like to think that the whole team is doing that and has that goal.

I don't call myself an exhibit developer. I feel that my skills have to do with developing team dynamics, determining who will do what, why it should be done, what is our main theme and messages, coming to consensus, then developing the appropriate media, always keeping that big picture.

I'm not necessarily a project manager, though there is some involved. I try to have someone else keep track
of all the logistics.

I do concept design and help plan the space, but I’m not an exhibit designer. My degree is in education. I think of myself as an interpreter.”

Doug Worts, Educator: Gallery Enhancement and Audience Research, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto

“I’m not quite sure what you mean by exhibit developer. I’m an educator and visitor researcher. In the mid 1980s, we started to take an audience-oriented approach to exhibits: lots of interactives, different room environments, different interpretive techniques to appeal to visitors of different backgrounds. The technology is integrated with rather than separated from the artwork, which is kind of unusual.

We had been doing some experimental exhibitions, and we caught the eye of the senior curator, who asked us to work with him on the reinstallation of the Canadian galleries. He had modest ambitions about rearranging the artwork and putting up new labels. We asked him about his assumptions about how the galleries were used, and we did baseline testing of the experience. This made it clear to him that the public perception had no relation to his intentions. We turned it from a traditional installation to single room with seven focal areas, interactive computers, and digital audio systems. Subsequent evaluations suggest we succeeded.”

Portia James, Historian, Anacostia Museum, Washington, D.C.

“I heard a curator at a conference say, ‘We don’t have a community of people to whom we feel responsible because our focus is on guns.’

No matter what you’re doing, you’re doing it for a group of people. Most people want to be responsive to the people in their neighborhood. Often for a particular exhibit, there’s a community that has an interest in the subject matter. The neighborhood and the community should be a part of the exhibit development process.

That doesn’t mean evaluation, which usually involves bringing in people to react to your work. Few people understand what goes on in order to realize an exhibit. That’s disempowering. To ask them to give feedback is not effective.

To get the community involved, you need to be more proactive. It’s to your own advantage. They’ve got insights that you won’t have. Go after them. And build their participation into the process.”

The dirty little secret of exhibit developers is that any of the tasks described in the adjacent listing could be done by somebody else on the exhibits team. Some share Darcie Fohrman’s ideal of exhibit development, that is, that everyone on the team is an exhibit developer. Is our mission to propel the field toward this ideal? Is our mission to make ourselves obsolete?

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