An Exhibit Developer is...

by Penny Jennings

Sharyn Horowitz and Katherine Krile’s 1997 *Exhibitionist* article “What is an Exhibit Developer?” was a turning point for me. Just out of graduate school, armed with a background teaching school field trips, wrangling public programs, answering phones and other museum odd jobs, I was at loose ends trying to plot my career trajectory. I was tagging along with an exhibit team, helping out with focus groups and project management, learning my way around the process and trying to figure out what I was good at. When I saw the sidebar listing of the various roles of the Exhibit Developer: visionary, curator, researcher, secretary, thinker, warrior, whiner, etc. I squealed with recognition, as did several others on the team. “This is it! Exactly!” we exclaimed. We wear many hats; we seek out the balance, stroke egos and stoke fires. We are not too shy to ask academics to slow down and explain their ideas in more simple terms, nor too proud to seek expert advice from fourth-graders. I still smile at that list when I see it. It has been photocopied, cut out, and taped to the office wall by exhibitors staff and consultants all over the country.

Ten years later, I have been asked to reflect on how our profession has changed since then, if at all. My first reaction is that while we may be more widely recognized, and have access to more refined tools and methods, the necessary skills and attitudes remain the same. I asked a handful of colleagues to weigh in.

What Qualities and Skills are Most Important to Doing Your Job Well?

At the top of most developers’ lists are flexibility and organization. You must be a good listener, able to hear what people are trying to communicate beyond what they are able to express. An exhibit developer has to synthesize and respond to a variety of opinions, building consensus without losing vision. Jenny-Sayre Ramberg adds, “You may be surprised that I put organized and good humored first—but I think that without those all the creativity and passion in the world can crash and burn in a team process. And of course—you could be organized and good humored and create a terrible exhibit.” We are always looking for ways to communicate with visitors—we borrow techniques from science, art, history and children’s museums, school classrooms and playgrounds, TV, film, advertising, theme parks and other entertainments.

Which Tools or Techniques are Most Useful to You?

On the pragmatic side, we listed project management skills including database management, on-line research tools like Google and Wikipedia, and negotiation skills (most often put to use for vigilant audience advocacy). On the creative side, we are always trying to improve our brainstorming, problem-solving and team-building techniques, and promote creative collaboration between team members, and with clients and communities.

Which Books and Articles Do You Keep Close at Hand for Reference?


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While there is still a disconnect between the science museum model of Exhibit Developer as tinkerer and builder, and the collections-based museums’ use of Developers to organize and translate curator-researched topics, there seems to be a better understanding that both sets of skills are important and that both are ultimately concerned with putting the visitor experience at the forefront. We hear more acknowledgement of different learning styles and modalities, and of the importance of play to the museum learning experience. We have to fight less often for physical accessibility, but are still weighing the “chicken and egg” balance between wanting content to drive design, and understanding that design issues are paramount to attracting and holding visitors’ attention. And since many Exhibit Developers would prefer to follow their passion than climb the institutional career ladder, there are more Exhibit Developers working as independent consultants.

What New Innovations Do You See on the Horizon that Might Impact the Way You Do Your Work?

- Tools for visualizing ideas. Already we can search for images on the web, copy and paste into an InDesign, Keynote or Quark document, add text, color, even QuickTime movies and 3D renderings from Vectorworks or SketchUp, and show the team what we are thinking about instead of just telling them. As visualization tools become more available and easier to use, exhibit creation will become more like exhibit experience.
- Real-time networked exhibits that access live data and update automatically. The potential has not even begun to be exploited.
- Non-invasive brain research (i.e., fMRI studies) will give us new ideas about how learners collect and process information.

- Chicago Manual Of Style
Still, some of the tested techniques still work the best—brainstorm, write ideas on index cards so you can shuffle them around, make sketches on cocktail napkins or whatever is at hand, craft clear communication goals in visitor language, and refer back to them throughout the process.

**What Do Exhibit Developers Do? Job Descriptions These Days are Likely to Include:**

- Research content
- Coordinate advisors and advisory groups
- Manage schedules and budgets (although sometimes your team is also blessed with a project manager)
- Facilitate team meetings
- Define content organization, communication goals and messages
- Design interactive devices
- Write multimedia treatments and scripts
- Research artifacts and images, and negotiate loans or rights and permissions
- Produce reports and client or funder presentations
- Write label copy

Some days it feels like bee-keeping; as curators, designers, educators and evaluators discover or dream up content and design ideas and bring them back to the hive, we give structure to their efforts, organizing the material for further refinement, and skimming off the sweetest stuff to serve to visitors.

Regardless of refinements in our roles or process, in Jenny-Sayre Ramberg’s words, “We will always have to answer the basic questions—Why are we doing this? Who are we doing it for? What are we trying to accomplish? What is it about? How much money do we have to spend? When does it open?”

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**What Do I Do?**

If you’re an exhibit developer, you might be all, some, or none of the following:

- **Visionary:** Inspire the process.
- **Curator:** Without the Ph.D. or the years of preparation, but with the pressure for accuracy.
- **Researcher:** Compile background, interview experts.
- **Secretary:** Listen to the Board, listen to the administration.
- **Thinker:** Synthesize all of it to get the main message.
- **Warrior:** Defend the main message.
- **Whiner:** Complain when the main message is ignored.
- **Translator:** Turn words into a three-dimensional, interactive, exciting exhibit.
- **Teacher:** Educate the designers who are too busy to learn about the content they’re exhibiting.
- **Evaluator:** Speak with visitors.
- **Advocate:** Speak up for visitors.
- **Project Manager:** Make charts, write purchase orders, manage, make it happen.
- **Therapist:** Make sure everyone feels a part of the process, that everyone’s ego is stroked.
- **Parent:** Prevent squabbling from bringing down the house.
- **Laboren:** Actually build the thing.

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