Exhibition Studies:

Designing Traveling Exhibitions for the Small Community

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This article is based on my thesis research on the interests of small communities in traveling exhibitions, and the creative ways in which four institutions have responded to these interests. The research was conducted in 2010-2011 for the University of the Art’s Masters of Museum Exhibition Planning and Design degree.

Scope of Research
The Census Bureau defines small communities as Micropolitan (10,000–50,000 people) and Rural (under 10,000 people). Most of the communities featured in this research were under 25,000 people (2000). I studied four organizations that have developed approaches and design strategies that address the needs of small communities. They were Artrain, California Exhibition Resource Alliance (CERA), the Kauffman Museum, and Museums on Main Street (MOMS).

Artrain is based in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and brings mobile traveling exhibitions to communities across the country. Initially offering art-themed exhibitions presented by train, Artrain has just transitioned to using tractor-trailers and offering a broader topic range. CERA was founded in 1988 when a group of small and rural museums throughout California formed a partnership with the California Humanities Council to find new and less costly ways to obtain and create traveling exhibitions. The Kauffman Museum, located in North Newtown, Kansas, is a medium-sized museum that creates traveling exhibitions. Finally, MOMS is based in Washington, DC as a partnership of the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, the Federation of Humanities Councils, and state humanities councils. It aim is to bring traveling exhibitions to the small towns and rural parts of the United States.

Research Findings: Cost and Impact are Key
My research revealed some common challenges for small communities using traveling exhibitions. In brief, traveling exhibitions have to be low cost, have a low impact on resources yet a high impact on the community, have a flexible design, and, a broad but flexible topic. The traveling exhibition organizers that I studied recognize these challenges in creating exhibitions for the small communities. To a varying extent, they have addressed these issues in their exhibition designs and approaches. Moreover, museums are not the only organization that can host traveling exhibitions in a community. Encouraged by the American Library Association, libraries have delved into traveling exhibitions (ALA Public Programs Office, 2010). My research also revealed civic organizations, churches, arts councils, and local governments are teaming up with the organizations and government agencies to bring exhibitions to their towns.

In a survey conducted for this research, overall cost was the biggest issue for exhibition users, whether museums, libraries, or other institutions. Cost was also the dominant reason that some small communities and museums have chosen to stop using traveling exhibitions. It is not just the cost of the physical exhibition. Other factors like transportation, human resources, marketing, insurance, security, even the cost of stamps have to be considered. (Torres-Carmona, Bork, Wooten-Bonner, & Owens, 2007).
Design Savings
The design of the traveling exhibition is one place to reduce cost. MOMS creates five versions of each traveling exhibition, taking advantage of the economy of scale. According to Director Carol Harsh, some of this savings is creating more interactives, featuring more objects, and creating visual interest and depth to the exhibit panels. MOMS uses modular panels that are lightweight and that store with relative ease into crates, reducing transportation costs.

For some of their traveling exhibitions, the Kauffman Museum incorporates the crates into the design as the bases of the exhibits. As the Kauffman’s Curator of Exhibitions, Chuck Regier explains the crate shell can be reversed to hide transportation wear. If a portion of the crate is damaged badly, it is an easy fix for the museum. They handle much of their own fabrication. For the exhibition user, the cost of storing the crates is greatly reduced or entirely eliminated (C. Regier, personal communication, February 15, 2011).

Since human resources are one of the more expensive factors in considering traveling exhibitions, this is an area where design planning can mitigate costs. According to Harsh, MOMS exhibitions are designed to be easy to assemble. The users assemble the exhibition with a group of four or five people, in one day, and with a basic set of tools (C. Harsh, personal communication, March 12, 2011). Although small museums are primary users, libraries and some civic organizations have used MOMS traveling exhibitions. Alternatively, the Kauffman Museum provides the installation crew and assembly time as a part of the cost of the traveling exhibition.

Transportation Savings
Another area to reduce cost is in transportation. MOMS and CERA have used “block-booking” to reduce the cost of transportation. Block-booking involves several museums or other organizations within a region that agree to book a large block of time for a traveling exhibition, with each organization displaying the exhibition in turn. The entities using the exhibition share the costs of transportation evenly, and the costs are reduced because of the relatively short distances between venues.

The Kauffman Museum takes a different approach to transportation. They own a 14 ft truck that delivers their traveling exhibitions. The staff loads the exhibition and drives it to the location. They install

Endnotes:
1 California Exhibition Resource Alliance recently announced its new name, Exhibits Envoy, which marks an evolution in their organization, size, and purpose. This article focuses on how they previously operated, as it is more relevant to the small community.

2 An example from a recent exhibition of this tiered pricing and discounts can be found at: http://www.artrainusa.org/files/Booking_Info_Packet-Artrain.pdf.
the exhibition, leave the truck on site and return home. They do the reverse at the end of the exhibition run. Regier estimates the truck and its associated costs paid for themselves within a year and a half; this transportation model also allows the museum to schedule the traveling exhibitions more tightly (C. Regier, personal communication, February 15, 2011).

Artrain creates mobile exhibitions that travel complete with an exhibit design and space incorporated onto train cars and, soon, tractor-trailers. For exhibition space, the exhibition user needs just a train track or a parking lot to host an exhibition. While Artrain presents a relatively high upfront cost, Deb Polich, Executive Director, estimates that 95% of their exhibition users are non-museum organizations. Because of this Artrain bundles the cost of items their exhibition users might not think to include, costs for which a museum staff would budget. They also help small communities obtain Artrain exhibitions by creating a three-tiered pricing system. Communities of 25,000 people or fewer receive the lowest costs.  

Value to the Community: Leaving a Legacy

Traveling exhibitions can provide new resources, in addition to reducing strain on current resources. For example, state humanities councils collaborate with MOMS and the exhibition users within their states, typically representing four to five locations, to create workshops in advance of receiving the traveling exhibition. The exhibition users work together to learn how to install the exhibition and to develop their resources. These workshops have the longer-term benefit of giving these organizations a network of people to talk with and new skills to bring into their future work. CERA has hosted similar workshops for its members, with a focus on networking and providing an opportunity to learn new exhibition skills. (A. McGraw, Executive Director of Exhibits Envoy, personal communication February 22, 2011).

Early in Artrain’s history, the communities they served would have been required to set up or actively run a local arts council. While it is no longer a requirement, the idea of leaving lasting impact is still integral to Artrain’s goals. They work with exhibition users, who are often local business owners, community arts leaders, or local officials, to develop events and desired outcomes. Polich refers to this collection of packets, meetings, and support system as a “mini-arts management program” that helps the exhibition users capitalize on Artrain’s visit. The outcomes can range from arts festivals and to new park benches. These goals do not have to be art-oriented, just important to the community (Personal communication, February 15, 2011).

References:


Artrain and MOMS develop their traveling exhibitions on themes such as Native American art or American Music that have a broad appeal and can build on local interests as well. The traveling exhibitions MOMS provides include a general overview. MOMS expects the exhibition users and communities to layer on their own local stories. The communities add their own objects and created locally relevant events around the traveling exhibition. As Harsh states “The small towns wow (us). They bring out parades, events, lectures, concerts, and all kinds of things. The civic organizations... get involved and add their own pieces to the exhibit.” (Personal communication, January 28, 2011). The states humanities councils act as a local support system to the exhibition users for this aspect of the MOMS traveling exhibition.

Conclusion
There are several common challenges for small communities that want to bring in traveling exhibitions. These four institutions have shown that there are multiple ways to respond successfully to those challenges. Their unique approaches can be boiled down to three interdependent concepts: cost, design, and impact.

Design philosophies can vary greatly and encompass everything from exhibit materials (which factor into cost) to incorporating local objects and stories (which raises local interests). Opportunities to network and develop skills make a traveling exhibition more valuable to those organizing the traveling exhibition in their small communities. When given the opportunity, people appear to be not only willing but enthusiastic in making the traveling exhibitions a part of their community —either through events, festivals, or adding their own local story to the exhibition. While financial considerations are important to small communities, my research confirms that the cost of a traveling exhibition is measured not just in the dollar amount but in overall value and legacy for those who use it.

References Continued:

