The Role of Information Design in Sparking Visitor Interest, Engagement, and Investigation

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Museum audiences are more diverse than ever before and, given a digital connection, they have immediate access to any information, anytime. To be relevant to these audiences, museums are changing and expanding their offerings in many ways. This paper is a case study of one institution that is using design as a strategic tool to help achieve new relevance and vitality in our community (Perrin, 1992). Our goal is to become a lively, fun, and engaging place for visitors of all ages and backgrounds by creating outstanding experiences with the real, physical evidence of the history of the earth and life on it.

The focus of this paper is information design, a tool that can make the difference between a pleasant visitor experience and a deep and engaging one. Incorporating information design considerations into the exhibition development process can also help exhibition development teams deal with issues that arise in trying to develop content rich exhibitions that are fun and engaging for visitors.

Moving Towards Intentional Design

The Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County (NHM) opened in 1913. Ninety years later, the museum was traditional to the point of being described by many as “stodgy.” Spectacular objects were displayed, but presentation was dated, and long text panels of detailed explanation were hard for most visitors to read. It was a museum designed by and for “readers” with nothing offered for “streakers” or “strollers.”

In 2006 the NHM embarked on an ambitious physical transformation of our public spaces. Our goal was to engage our visitors in ways that would delight and surprise them. By 2013 we had touched roughly 60% of the public floor of the NHM, expanded, and become an indoor-outdoor museum. During the process we incorporated design as a strategic tool, aiming for clarity, consistency, and coherence in visitor experience and external perception.

A first critical step was to define our design and experience goals. A 360-degree branding study by Kim Baer included deep internal investigation of mission and assets. To bring the new NHM brand to life, we developed a set of core principles to promote freshness and clarity of message, tone, and storytelling to capture audience curiosity, imagination, and emotions. This applied to everything from writing to graphic design, from advertising to exhibitions.

Bringing the Re-invigorated Brand into the Galleries

The NHM brand now embodies our mission “to inspire wonder, discovery and responsibility for our natural and cultural worlds.” We set out to present the most spectacular specimens, with deep and timely content, in ways that are fun and relevant for our visitors. This dual focus on deep content and visitor experience required a robust and committed team with the right members at the table throughout. Incorporating information design in our process was one of the keys to our success.

At the outset of each new exhibition project, we asked the lead curator to develop core content, subjected it to peer review and gathered an exhibition
development team specific to the subject. We hired leading exhibition design firms and asked them to create design solutions that served the content and visitor experience goals. We commissioned front-end evaluation to ascertain our audiences’ prior knowledge and areas of interest. We used formative evaluation with prototypes, and later rapid prototyping and testing throughout the process.

Our visitors are mostly intergenerational groups, and many of these groups include very small children. By their very nature, these groups tend to be “streakers,” following the interest of the youngest members of their party. But visitor research told us that adults also wanted to be engaged, and that it was important to them that every member of their group enjoyed the experience. We set the ambitious goal of presenting deep content in a layered way that would be satisfying for visitors of all ages, backgrounds, and learning styles, whether they read only the headlines (streaking), chose to spend more time in some sections (strolling) or tried to go through systematically (reading) (James Clark Design, n.d.). Because most of our galleries serve as major thoroughfares to other areas of the museum, we knew that visitors would be passing through in different ways, and that we had to make the experience satisfying no matter how they entered an exhibition, or how much of it they saw.

**Information Design for Visitors of all Ages**

We embraced best practices in information design to help bring our content strategies to life. Some of these practices include:

- Clear and consistent information hierarchies (Serrell, 1996)
- A layered approach to the content
- Careful juxtaposition of graphics, copy and specimens with strategic use of information graphics and imagery to convey important concepts
- Writing and language that deliver deep content in a warm, inviting way (influenced heavily by Judy Rand’s work, 2010).
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We used these approaches to introduce and set the tone of the exhibition, guide visitor attention to important themes and crucial takeaway messages, clarify and reinforce wayfinding and content organization through the exhibition, and provide invitations at every turn to explore deeper. One of our biggest challenges was to organize and present content in ways that felt open and accessible, and to keep things from getting too dense. The information hierarchy developed with the curator and the rest of the team was key to prioritizing content.

We also focused on providing context and, importantly, creating personal experiences and connections. We worked hard to juxtapose graphics and writing in ways that encourage engagement and hands-on activity and that provide memorable experiences and photo opportunities.

Set the Tone
Color, materials, the choice of typefaces, and the style of imagery speak to audiences from the moment they cross the threshold of an exhibition. Based on content planning and goals, design teams developed a range of “mood boards” very early in the development process to determine the right tone for the look and feel of each exhibition.

Introduce the Exhibition with an Initial “Handshake”
Visitors navigate exhibitions in myriad ways, even if the museum proposes a preferred route. With multiple entrances to most galleries, we made sure to create a clear introductory point at each entrance, without being redundant.

Telegraph Crucial Take-Aways
From the outset, we worked with the curators to identify the three to five key messages that were the most critical for visitors to take away. Designers optimized opportunities to reinforce these messages in high visibility places throughout the exhibition to maximize memorability.

Reinforce Core Messages and Wayfinding
At the beginning of each project, we looked for ways to organize the sections of each exhibition to help reinforce the key ideas. Once structures were determined, graphics strategies reinforced wayfinding and hierarchy.
Grab Attention
Adopting a best practice from the world of magazine design, we used inventive and unexpected imagery to attract attention and encourage visitors to come closer. Smart captioning can be one of the most effective tools for telegraphing key ideas.

Provide Invitations to Explore
Multi-layered graphics can provide invitations to explore. They encourage visitors to scan for high-level information and then, if inclined, linger for a deeper dive. Bold, intriguing headlines draw people in. More detailed subheads then deliver key takeaways in scannable bites. Lively copy and clearly defined hierarchies provide points of entry for different levels of interest and experience with the topic, promote conversation, and encourage repeat visits to read more.

Keep Things from Getting too Dense
One of our biggest challenges is to make the exhibitions open and inviting, and keep them from feeling too dense. This is a challenge in the selection, organization, and presentation of objects and the accompanying graphics. We ask curators to lead the process of creating the content, and then use iterative formative evaluation to hone the most effective ways to convey complex information. Careful juxtapositions of specimens, photographs, diagrams, and written labels can be highly successful, but visitor testing showed that even subtle differences in organization and content can make the difference in creating a fulfilling visitor experience.

The process requires clear articulation of the stories, careful selection of the most important content and stories, and then experimenting with graphic devices and methods of delivery to convey the depth of the science content. Choosing which information to include and what to leave out is one of the most challenging parts of exhibition design, as all exhibition teams know. We found that data from visitor studies helps teams understand what content and messages worked and what did not, which then helps them to make the hard decisions about which content to cut.

Provide Context
Graphics that are well integrated with specimen display and the furniture can encourage visitors to look more closely, and help to answer “Why should I care?” This can be especially important with small and/or obscure objects. By using graphics to provide context, we give visitors the tools they need to “decode” the stories inherent in each object.

Make it Personal
In all of our work, we try to find opportunities to help visitors make a personal connection to the content. Whether it’s the tonality of the writing, the scale of the exhibition furnishings, or the display techniques, we work to make sure visitors can see relevance in the stories being told.

Make it Tactile and Multidimensional
With each of our new exhibitions, we developed a unique and integrated graphic

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The main label for a newly mounted Triceratops in the Dinosaur Hall was designed to provide multiple entry points for visitors (headline, text, maps, and illustrations). Courtesy of KBDA.

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language that connected wayfinding, didactics, hands-on interactives, and multimedia, in order to create a more seamless, multisensory visitor experience. Our evaluations have shown that this attention to design—which helps visitors navigate exhibitions—directly increases visitor satisfaction and dwell time.

**Make it Memorable**

In an era where the power of social media is increasing exponentially, we’ve made sure to create meaningful “photo ops” in each of our exhibitions. This capitalizes on our visitors’ appetite for capturing and sharing the moment.

**Results and Lessons Learned**

The net results of the NHM’s transformation include a 40% increase in annual attendance, much greater brand awareness in the community, and visitor satisfaction ratings of excellent in the 90th percentiles (up from 50-60%). Most visitors report they are having fun and learning. Summative evaluations to date indicate that visitors are grasping high-level content takeaways. Visitors spontaneously express appreciation for the design, and they are excited about the content. Adults report feeling that all members of their group are well served and multigenerational groups engage together with exhibit content.

We learned some critical lessons in the process of this work.

- **Design should serve the greater goals of the museum.** Having museum leaders outside the exhibition team review all key products for visitor experience and coherence helps us stay on track.

- **Producing experiences with a deep focus on both the visitor experience and the presentation of deep timely content requires a fully integrated exhibition team, with designers in the same room with curators and the rest of the team throughout the process.** Roles, responsibilities, and the decision-making process need to be clearly defined and maintained throughout.

- **Design cannot mask or make up for content gaps or inherent storyline weaknesses.** Good designers can flag these problems, and well-managed teams can solve them before it is too late. During our process, it was often the information designers who pushed the team to refine the core ideas, identifying the most critical take-away concepts so the team could refine the approach.

- **Visitor testing with prototypes can help multidisciplinary teams test core premises and specific strategies, including “how much is too little, how much is too much?”** The exhibition development process
Our evaluations have shown that this attention to design—which helps visitors navigate exhibitions—directly increases visitor satisfaction and dwell time.

must allow for iteration in response to audience evaluation. We found that visitor testing from concept development through prototype labels and interactives helped focus the entire team on finding what worked best for visitors.

An Intentionally Designed Destination for the Next Century
Visitor studies tell us that our visitors are intensely curious and that they value the real thing in ways that are special and unique. Putting core assets together—deep content, and the real thing, with pleasing, well-designed experiences—invites visitors to visit, engage, and investigate. While this is not an easy or simple task, the results of these early projects have inspired us to continue developing this approach, using information design as a key tool in our overall design of visitor experiences.

Different graphic techniques can play on a graphic novel as well as invite visitors to identify with and make personal connections with the content. This graphic lives next to a display of live rats in the Nature Lab, NHM’s exhibition on urban nature. Courtesy of Lexington Design and Fabrication.

References:

Resources on information design: