COVID-19 ushered in a new reality for all of us. An ironic reality that socially distanced us while also unifying us in addressing shared challenges – especially in the realm of planning and designing for spaces where humans gather and interact.

In 2019, Naomi and Lauren, coauthors of this article, worked together on a project at the Smithsonian on an exhibition drawn from the science and health collections. During this project, they studied how human-centered-design techniques could be integrated within traditional exhibit development frameworks. As Lauren transitioned from her role as Senior Project Manager at the Smithsonian into her position at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) as Exhibits and Artifacts Program Manager, and Naomi’s work in strategic planning with Storycraft Lab shifted toward brand marketing experiences, they stayed in touch as friends and colleagues, both always interested in expanding their community of practice.

In this article, we share details of an effort called the FuturesForum – and the teamwork, quick reinvention, and changing nature of collaboration we helped uncover that led to new ways of working for NASA and its Visitor Center Consortium, the museums and visitor centers across the country.
that share NASA stories. Please consider this article a toolkit for your organization – it can be scaled and modified and, we hope, will provide kernels of information to help your team operate differently in a changing world.

**The FuturesForum**

In the early days of the pandemic, Naomi reached out to colleagues around the country, including Lauren, to bring them together as thought leaders. They came together from museums, government agencies, and private industry to connect and collaborate in the form of an informal, online forum. The goal was to consider how narrative experiences, from museum exhibitions to business events, would be impacted by the pandemic. The diverse group included planners and strategists at Microsoft, Google, Hubb (a virtual event planning platform), Intel (a technology company), Amazon, PCMA (Professional Convention Management Association), the Smithsonian Institution, museum design firm Gallagher & Associates, and Georgetown University’s Ethics Lab. While we were all specialists in our respective fields – whose paths did not frequently cross in a pre-COVID world – we were together solving for the same problem: how do we design engaging experiences in a post-COVID world?

These conversations began informally but quickly gelled into weekly sessions where members convened by Zoom as a roundtable to collaboratively and collectively discuss how we might respond to the challenges we all faced. Naomi named this group the “FuturesForum” – and the “Future” we had to address was immediate. The goal of convening and learning from each other was to answer these questions: How do we adapt our industries? Learn new skills? Reach our audiences? Engage our content? Not all of the players in the FuturesForum produce exhibitions in a traditional museum setting. However, all involved are storytellers and many develop and produce exhibits that are featured at trade shows and conferences, and shared thoughts in these sessions on how COVID-19 might impact both museums as well as large gatherings of people. What connected us all was the human experience of space and message.

As Mark Dominguez, Strategic Planner at Intel explains, this challenge actually presented us with the time to realize a significant opportunity – to learn from one another, to share best practices and to prepare to meet new realities:

As it became apparent that COVID-19 was going to change the landscape of our industries, many people were stunned still by this previously unimaginable scenario. This challenge presented us with the time to realize a significant opportunity: to learn from one another, to share best practices, to prepare to meet new realities. The biggest opportunity of this time was to re-forge relationships, to re-imagine what engagement looked like, and to explore new ways of collaborating with an unprecedented degree of partnership and teamwork. This was a time for investment into self, industry and community.

How do we adapt our industries? Learn new skills? Reach our audiences? Engage our content?
What we discovered is that by embracing this opportunity, we could find new ways of collaborating.

**Connecting Communities**

In the weeks that followed the rapid shutdown of pre-pandemic life, FuturesForum became a venue for sharing best practices and challenges and for brainstorming ideas and approaches that drew on the power of collaborative group think. In truth, the think-tank approach served more than a professional need; at the start of our adjustment to COVID-19, we were all dealing with personal circumstances that were unprecedented. We all had a deep need for human connection, to understand how others were processing and dealing with the situation. That access to others helped to deliver a context that helped us understand and with it some degree of normalcy, albeit a new normal. The shared personal challenges and new use of virtual tools to talk to others (in their homes, no less) uncovered and super-charged something else: empathy.

In the world of experience marketing (immersive campaigns that engage viewers with product and brand messaging), empathy is the first stage in the any innovative design-thinking process. Empathizing is primarily an audience-focused activity. We seek to understand the needs and perspectives of our audiences and ask questions that enable us to build profiles and personae that in turn help us to identify the drivers and barriers of behaviors. What moves them to action? What connects them most powerfully to a message? What propels them up the ladder of engagement? This process of dialogue leads to insights, uncovering opportunities...
for impactful, resonant engagement. Whether that be with an intent of marketing or educating, it helps us to better deliver our messages. The circumstances around the COVID-19 crisis inspired us to widen the lens of empathy to include our teams, our colleagues, ourselves. We asked questions of one another—what do “WE” need to move forward? How and where are WE stuck? What inspires US to action? We applied the tools and techniques of audience engagement to encourage collective progress and help us overcome our internal inertia. In leveraging the virtual tools at our disposal, we reenergized communities that had existed within our networks before, but now became accessible and active in a new way.

**Forum Formats**

As the FuturesForum met, a group of six people grew to 10, and then 16—and it became apparent that the group needed structures for organizing the various discussions. Naomi and Storycraft Lab created a syllabus for an initial eight-week series that would investigate the challenges and opportunities that a shift to virtual engagement presented (figs. 1 & 2). We began with assessing future norms—beginning by acknowledging engagement theories from purely physical in-person experiences that were no longer applicable, and identifying what we needed to know moving forward. From there, the group...
Research shows us that personalized journeys allow discovery and exploration within the learning experience.

By providing an inclusive variety of pathways tailored to learning and social preferences, we ask customers to participate in creating their own customized learning journey.

This participatory approach increases excitement, engagement and efficacy in the experiences we deliver.

-Usha Chazhiyat, Intel
considered data and measurement, gamification, spatial experience, user journeys, educational engagement – all design parameters in the planning and development of exhibits and experiences that cut across industry verticals.

During the eight weeks, we analyzed the trends we saw emerging in the marketplace as brands, museums, and cultural organizations used virtual methods to engage their audiences. Together we reflected on how we had adapted in our own work, and shared insights and inspiration from our respective industries. Each week’s discussion was highly curated to create conversations between regular contributors and guest visitors, using tailored questions and a variety of discussion formats. We also created a podcast, as well as soundbites, a “discussion map” (fig. 3) – a visual notetaking canvas in MURAL – and shareable “notable quotables” (fig. 4): graphics that helped to highlight and broadcast the session’s thought leadership.

**Actioning Insights**

At the end of our initial eight-week series, the FuturesForum culminated with a three day-long “Untethered Conference,” intended to give the group a sense of forward momentum and purpose. Hubb created the conference to connect and support the event industry during this time of profound change. “Untethered,” hosted by Hubb, was an unabashed attempt to “break the internet” – which meant providing fun, engaging, irreverent, and uplifting content that invited attendees to take part in a virtual experience and test the limits of the technology. We wanted to prove to an industry bereft at the loss of live-face-to-face interaction that “Virtual Events Don’t Have to Suck” and connect a community with a positive message. And it was an experience, apparently, that the audience truly needed – over 5,000 strategic planners and designers attended the conference, which was free (but with a recommended donation to benefit the Meetings Industry Fund).

Allie Magyar, CEO of Hubb and creator of the Untethered Conference had this to say:

> I saw an industry, and its people, who I have so much passion for – confounded by fear of the unknown future. Planners are solvers – it’s our superpower. Untethered was created to remind our industry of the power of our shared strength. We...can accomplish more as a group than individually. In that way Untethered became a platform for an empowered community – one that felt enabled to contribute to future models in a positive, meaningful and valuable way.

It was here that FuturesForum participants shared their learnings and conversations and tested the ideas with a much broader audience. Key insights and excerpts from the FuturesForum discussion were shared in a synopsis presentation, members of the FuturesForum were matched with conference attendees for “fireside chats,” and NASA, through Lauren, partnered with Naomi’s firm – Storycraft Lab – to host an “Idea-Jam” (fig. 5, p.64): an ideation session that asked the industry to brainstorm concepts for addressing how exhibition stories might be told and experiences designed for a post-COVID, pre-vaccine world.

The Untethered Conference’s openness to pushing boundaries created an environment that allowed for experimentation without...
How do we create immersive, engaging and educational exhibit experiences in a post COVID19, pre - vaccine world?

How can we encourage interaction beyond touch?
Fig. 5. This image was from the Idea-Jam at the Untethered Conference, hosted by Lauren and Storycraft Lab.
Consider creating your own FuturesForum to bring together diverse voices with different areas of professional expertise to consider tricky questions, discover new insights, test innovative ideas, and finally, study and celebrate their application – together.

For us, the conference helped us consider practical issues in our own work. When NASA moved all staff at its Washington, DC headquarters to telework status in mid-March 2020, we were not quite certain of the future. How long would we be working remotely, what would happen to planned events, how would this impact our work? In addition to museum exhibitions, NASA engages various communities around the world with short- and long-term exhibitions about their work. These exhibitions are for academic and space policy conferences, students of all ages, and the general public.

NASA had begun to consider how to modify a highly interactive exhibition to allow for social distancing, so we used the Idea-Jam, presented by Naomi and Lauren at Untethered, to brainstorm pertinent issues (not necessarily solutions). What are the items that need to be considered during social distancing? For example, how do you shift from touchable interactives? How do you have experts explain complicated topics from six feet away? How do you share outreach material when you can’t touch?

After the Idea-Jam, we presented at an internal session at NASA about the future of events and exhibitions to encourage robust conversation between internal and external thinkers about our recent exploration into the world of virtual events and exhibits. How do we create high quality experiences and what platforms are available? For us, we saw the value of the think tank in allowing broader groups to participate in a problem-solving discussion, and it helped us reframe both our understanding of the challenges we perceived as well as our understanding of audience needs and desires.

We envision this as part one of the discussion; a follow-up in early 2021 will consider both sharing information and resources and hearing from our colleagues on what they have learned in their work. As we write this in late 2020, we can further reflect that even with a vaccine, some of these issues will still be at play. How do we have in-person experiences with masks, social distancing and minimal touchable interactives? How does that change storytelling? What does a hybrid world look like?
like where some people will be together, and some might join from remote locations? We know that in the brand marketing realm, the virtual channel has created greater inclusion and accessibility for audiences, and this is a positive development that many brands do not want to cede in the future. We know too that museums will grapple with these same issues for exhibitions and programs.

**Summary**

The nature of change is that it forces us to encounter the uncomfortable, deviate from well-honed processes, and innovate new approaches. This learning curve can be both tiring but illuminating, a tough but invigorating journey. The message we would like to share through this article is that change, and the growth that comes with it, does not have to be a solo journey. The strength we find from one another in working through adversity is golden. Embrace this uncomfortable encounter, take the time to ask yourself what you need to succeed and then, ask the same question of your colleagues and your audiences.

- Build a group of intrepid explorers to journey with you and commit to learning from one another along the way. Find time for fun and create safe spaces for testing and failure.

- Apply empathy to your teams and to your audiences – now is the time to revisit the personas that drive your strategy and ask again what your audience needs and how your engagement can meet that new need.

- Consider creating your own FuturesForum to bring together diverse voices with different areas of professional expertise to consider tricky questions, discover new insights, test innovative ideas, and finally, study and celebrate their application – together.

- Build relationships that you might not normally have or take the time to invest in existing relationships. Ask your colleagues what they’ve learned in this time and how you could be inspired by their work or even reproduce it in your own organization.

We know that by this time next year things will look different. We hope that they will be better, but we know that we are heading into a new normal. We believe that work will look different with some organizations, offering employees full to part-time telework. We think museum visitation will also look different with timed tickets and virtual programs. Experiences for conferences and tradeshows will likewise continue to change. Packing people into a shared space for maximum visitation will no longer be how we measure success. Instead, we’ll need to assess our strategic success by understanding how we have included, inspired, and impacted our audiences meaningfully. Creative collaboration and connecting new communities will be how we, as storytellers, expand and engage our audiences to great effect.

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1 This title is from a Hubb webinar presentation, “Virtual Events Don’t Have to Suck,” available at: https://info.hubb.me/virtual-events-dont-have-to-suck.