

Raising the Bar

A Study of Exhibitions at the Smithsonian Institution

Office of Policy and Analysis
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Exhibition-making is a Major Activity at the Smithsonian



In FY 1999 and FY 2000,

200 new exhibitions

Occupying 1,200,000 square feet

Costing \$40 million in direct expenditures

Costing \$60 million (or more) in staff time

(Excluding SITES)

About half of SI exhibitions are art exhibitions

Art exhibitions are much less expensive



	Art	Non-art
Average direct cost*	\$90,000	\$450,000
Average size	4,200 sq. ft.	3,400 sq. ft.
Average cost/sq.ft.	\$19.40	\$91.89

*
FY1999-2000

Exhibition Quality



High Quality...

In studies of 11 SI exhibitions before 2004,
20% - 50% of visitors scored them in the
top satisfaction category

...But Not as High as Elsewhere

At the Holocaust Museum, and Cincinnati Art Museum, 70% or more of visitors score the exhibitions in the top satisfaction category

Major Weaknesses of SI Exhibitions

- Narrow range of design approaches
- Rarely immersive and interactive
- Limited appeal for diverse audiences
- Safe, conservative interpretations
- Subject-specialist perspective dominates
- Poor intellectual and physical maintenance

The Path to Improvement

Make meeting the needs of visitors

– *as visitors define them* –

a leading principle of SI exhibitions.

Promote and reward
creativity and innovation.

Include on-going maintenance
in all exhibition budgets and protect the funds.

Guiding Principles for Quality

Exhibitions should be visitor-driven

Exhibitions should serve
a wide range of audiences

Exhibition Management



Each Unit Acts Alone

- No master exhibition schedule
- No central database of planned exhibitions
- Little sharing of resources and staff
- Little joint planning
- Little sharing of information and experience
- Limited sharing of collections for exhibitions
- Little training and staff development

As a result...

While each unit is subject to limitations and bureaucracy due to the size of SI,

it does not make use of the advantages of SI scale and expertise across units.

Planning is Inadequate

- Little strategic thinking about exhibitions
- Few attempts to draw new audiences
- Excessive homogeneity of presentation within individual museums
- Poor systems of idea selection and concept development
- Overly long permanent exhibitions

Processes are Deficient

- Voice of the visitor not represented in exhibition-making
- Exhibition teams rarely look to other industries for ideas
- Project teams are dominated by subject-matter experts
- Incentives and accountability are weak

The Path to Improvement

Six Steps

1. Planning strategically
2. Improving processes
3. Involving visitors
4. Leveraging across units
5. Sharing information
6. Training staff

1. Planning Strategically

Across SI as a whole:

Which audiences will be targeted?

Which themes will be linked/integrated?

How will audiences be engaged?

What standards will measure performance?

How will visitorship be made more inclusive?

How will approaches show more variety?

2. Improving Processes

- Generate a wider range of exhibition ideas
- Encourage more innovative approaches to concept development
- Give exhibition developers, designers and other exhibition professionals equal voice with subject specialists in some projects

3. Involving Visitors

- Investigate what visitors to Smithsonian exhibitions are seeking
- Incorporate visitor studies and prior evaluations into the exhibition development process
- Establish panels of actual/potential visitors of different ages and backgrounds to comment on plans

4. Leveraging Across Units

- Maintain strong pockets of exhibition expertise in different units
- Engage these professionals in projects across units through internal contracting
- Promote temporary exchanges of exhibition staff among units


5. Sharing Information

- Set up mechanisms to capture and share exhibition planning information
- Establish and maintain a master exhibition schedule
- Require de-briefings on all exhibition projects

6. Training Staff

- Set aside adequate training funds
- Provide SI-wide training seminars in exhibition-related areas
- Offer a system of travel grants for exhibition specialists

Cultural Obstacles to Change

- Academic orientation is the foremost value
 - Subject specialists have greater influence than others on the exhibition team
 - Many subject specialists are more committed to their discipline than to visitor needs
 - The Smithsonian is risk-averse
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Improvement Requires Leadership

To provide clear guidance

To foster coordination and support

To alter longstanding habits



The path to
excellence
is worth
the climb.