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# *Creating Exhibits That Engage: A Manual for Museums and Historical Organizations*

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Reviewed by Ellen Leerburger

Museum professionals wear many hats, and there's value in even the mundane tasks we grumbled through early in our careers, whether wrangling the copier machine or maintaining endless mailing lists. We learned to be intellectually adroit multitaskers who can be utility players and generalists in all things museum. And while many of us have played a part in creating exhibitions, few have been involved in the exhibit development process at every stage, at every level, mastering an array of practical problems, anticipating each design challenge. All of the crucial elements of this huge and time-consuming institutional undertaking – developing the overall exhibition content, obtaining rights for images, soliciting artifacts, or feeding graphic designers the finished text – require a level of mastery that's somewhat dependent upon the opportunities you're given. It's difficult to see the whole picture.

John Summers brings his background as a curator, educator, designer and manager to create this “exhibit cookbook.” In it, he spells out, in detail, the thinking, planning, creating and assessing exhibitions for small- to medium-sized museums and cultural institutions with a steady eye on the audiences served. *Creating Exhibits that Engage: A Manual for Museums and Historical Organizations* provides an excellent and needed manual that puts together all the

disparate parts in a cohesive and intelligent way.

As a longtime educator and audience advocate, I was gratified to see that Summers focuses on the visitor experience, foregrounding their needs. He astutely notes that “the client is the audience,” a recurring theme throughout the book. This ongoing thread combines the visitors' needs and experiences with a space for them to ponder and reflect upon what is displayed. The book is not a scholarly manifesto, but a working guide for museum professionals. It will allow them to gain confidence as they experiment while keeping the big picture of “What makes a good exhibit?” and “How do I make one?” as the basic theses. The format is straightforward: four sections with bite-sized chapters, each followed by a summary checklist. Images with descriptive captions that relate directly to important points raised in the text, four very detailed and useful appendices, and a 50-term glossary round out the book.

The first two sections are the meatiest and most helpful for the entire exhibition process and allow for the most staff creativity, whereas the final two are more labor intensive and cut and dry. “Context, Audience and Process” outlines the fundamentals of conceptualizing and contextualizing an exhibition. Summers refers to exhibitions as “social spaces,” a successful exhibition



A MANUAL FOR  
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# CREATING EXHIBITS THAT ENGAGE



JOHN  
SUMMERS

## *Creating Exhibits That Engage: A Manual for Museums and Historical Organizations*

John Summers

Published by Rowman & Littlefield/American  
Association for State and Local History (AASLH),  
hardback, paperback, and eBook, 2018.

216 pages

as one that combines what visitors bring to the experience with what is presented to them. This constructivist approach favors process over product and gives the reader (and exhibit developers) much to chew on. He also advocates for the importance of connecting the visitor with authentic objects that are challenging, provocative, revitalizing and moving, and creating moments that both “teach and delight.” He also lays out how to make these key goals attainable.

The second section, “Concept Development,” drills down on the overarching “big idea” known as the Exhibit Brief, which “informs and guides every aspect of the exhibit project from preliminary design to final evaluation.”

Summers walks us through the writing of this all-important document, which serves as a bible throughout the process. It asks important questions that forces institutions to consider if they need to bring in outside consultants to supplement their internal skillsets in design, evaluation, fabrication, or more. It also dives into the importance of interpretive planning, text writing, and budgeting. Additionally, Summers suggests the institution consider what staff time will be required for each task, and how to create an accurate schedule and budget to present to museum decision makers or to include in a Request for Proposals (RFP). The section’s denser definitions and lists, while clearly written for design novices,



are also useful reminders for experienced museum professionals. He addresses everything from core documents (goals and objectives, mission and vision) to the roles and responsibilities of staff.

Summers writes in detail about museum text, focusing on the visitor and advocating for the audience experience. I appreciated his thoughtful advice on being watchful of unintended biases and deciding in advance precisely what role the text will play in the overall content delivery and design of the exhibition. He reiterates that texts should be written for the designated audience (not for curators or scholars), and should not merely describe the meaning of an artifact or image, but allow for multiple interpretations, including, perhaps most importantly, the perspective of the visitor.

Philip Hughes, a noted British exhibit designer, describes the museum visitor's experience as "a comprehensible three-dimensional journey," and Summers uses this concept as the underpinnings for his third section, "Design Development." Here he takes a deep dive into this more functional aspects of developing exhibitions, drilling down into panel arrangement, typography, vector imaging, and other digital and technological processes, making floor plans and models, and the importance of Universal Design. Again, Summers reiterates the importance of considering the audience throughout all aspects of the presentation experience. He adheres (as do I) to the "less is more" philosophy, and suggests that all interpretive pieces should be selected for packing the biggest visual punch so that the design "makes the good stuff sing." This may

seem obvious, but, in practice, when faced with a plethora of compelling content, this is not always easy to achieve. *Creating Exhibits That Engage* ticks off many familiar points, but also prompts moments of reflection and, "Oh yes, that is a good point I should definitely remember and share with my team!" It is valuable to have it all laid out in such a straightforward and summary way.

The final section narrows in on exhibit fabrication. Summers gives instructions – accompanied by detailed images – for how an institution might take on this phase in-house for "less than the price of a moderately priced car." This is chock full of pictures and text on what to purchase for the perfect shop scenario, from software to specific types of saws. Again, Summers guides us through the process of building exhibit furniture and mounts, fabrication, installation, and post-opening punch lists – a useful if dense final section of the book, and the end phase of the exhibition process.

Parts of each of the four sections of the book deal with the nitty gritty of lists and documents. For example, "What Is a Good Exhibit?" lists 20 guiding principles to help institutions create the best possible experience for their visitors. Two examples are "Get the exhibit off the walls and out into the gallery," and "Humor can have its place, but use it well..." "The Visitor's Bill of Rights" lists 11 important elements to remember about the visitor's experience, such as comfort, communication, belonging, learning, and choice.

"Principles of Universal Design" outlines seven recommendations for how design can



help to create the best exhibition experience for the widest number of people. Some of those ways are through flexibility, equitable usage, and intuitive use. These and the many other lists are written in clear, descriptive language. While I've been through the full exhibition process numerous times, I nonetheless found these sections to be incredibly useful refreshers on the basics.

Summers also lays out the process and the value of following a clear and prescribed route so that one exhibition document impacts the next. He posits that since visitors take their cues from a project's design – text, graphics, lighting, artifact mounts, layout, and overarching message – designers should be thoughtful and aware of the importance of the effect of every element of exhibition development. There is an unspoken dance between those creating the exhibits and those viewing them, and that partnership is crucial. Additionally, several times throughout the book, Summers talks about the successful exhibition design process as a collaborative effort within the institution. This inclusiveness acts as both a series of “teachable moments” writ large, as well as opportunities for staff learning, team building, and morale boosting.

Summers closes out *Exhibits That Engage* with a glossary and four appendices. The first appendix is a detailed walkthrough of how to develop an institutional exhibition plan that emphasizes core documents, such as mission and vision statements, and strategic, master, collections, and interpretive plans. The next discusses issues related to creating traveling exhibits and what to plan and look out for. The “Sample RFP” appendix uses

a fictitious project and creates a full-out request for proposal, outlining all the tasks to be undertaken by a hired consultant (or firm) as well as those of the institution. The last appendix zeros in on four different design strategies (or “solid tricks to get you... thinking like a designer”), such as using silhouetted images or oversized graphics. While the content used in the appendices is referenced throughout the book, some in great detail, there is also the added bonus of sample, specific exhibitions that are informative and useful.

While reading this book, I found myself nodding my head and underlining passages to remember, not just for this review but for my own practice. Even though I've worked in the museum field for nearly three decades, many of the ideas that John Summers raises resonate with me, particularly the higher-level concepts of audience-centeredness and inclusivity. I plan to share some of Summers' observations with current project teams I work with, as they pertain not just to exhibitions, but also to programming and overall institutional planning. I most definitely recommend this useful manual as an excellent addition to the how-to shelf of any exhibition maker's library.

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