



Hiring an Exhibit Designer for the First Time? Tips from a Designer's Perspective

by Douglas Simpson

Douglas Simpson is a Senior Exhibit Designer and Associate at Cambridge Seven Associates, Inc. He may be contacted at dsimpson@c7a.com.

So you're thinking about hiring an exhibit design consultant for the first time? Perhaps you are re-doing a permanent exhibit, and your in-house staff would be overwhelmed by the task. Maybe you're expanding your facility and have the opportunity to tell your story in a new way. Perhaps you're applying for a grant and need some assistance with the conceptual design along with sketches to assist funders in seeing your vision. Here are some tips as you begin this journey.

First, it's helpful to know what exhibit design firms can and cannot do.

- They should be good listeners and help you tell your story.
- They'll help conceptualize the kind of experience that will best communicate your message and determine the most effective exhibit strategies.
- They can bring a wide range of expertise—from spatial organization to informal learning; from interactive exhibits to media design and production.

But what the designer can NOT do is define your identity. Your mission and educational goals should be crystal clear. Your audience should be identified. This is the starting point.

Finding an Exhibit Designer

Exhibit design firms generally fall into one of a number of categories:

- Small firms, often just one or two designers
- Larger firms, usually with a broad range of expertise, perhaps with national or international experience.

- Exhibit design and architecture firms, capitalizing on the synergy between these two disciplines.
- Design/build companies, fabrication facilities with in-house design capabilities.

Each type has its strengths, and you should determine which is the best fit for your project.

Professional organizations are a good place to begin looking for exhibit designers. The following websites have on-line directories: NEMA (www.nemanet.org), American Association of Museums (www.aam-us.org), National Association for Museum Exhibition (www.n-a-m-e.org), and Exhibit Builder (www.exhibitbuilder.net). Of course, other museum colleagues can often provide good recommendations as well.

Sometimes for very small projects or projects on an extremely tight schedule, you may want to forego the RFQ and RFP process. Assessing qualifications and background through websites may be enough to limit the field to a few likely candidates and you can move right to the interview process.

For larger project though, after identifying design firms, a Request for Qualifications is usually sent out. This may be broadcast widely or only sent to a select group. These are relatively simple for design firms to respond to, and often involve sending examples of past projects and perhaps answering some basic questions about the firm's approach to design.

At this point, the museum winnows down the group and a Request for Proposals (RFP) is sent out to a select group of usually no more than five consultants. This is more demanding

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for design firms to complete and often involves answering many more specific questions regarding the project, as well as developing fees and schedules. Because of the expense and time consuming nature of completing these proposals, design firms are often leery when a large number of firms are included in the RFP process.

The proposals help the museum judge the capabilities of each firm and whether it is an appropriate fit for the project. From this group, interviews are conducted (usually limited to three firms). A museum should be prepared to tell the designers what it would like to learn...either relevant expertise, ideas about the project, or other specific questions. This is primarily an opportunity to determine if the “chemistry” is right. Exhibit design can be a long, and at times, trying process (of course, it should be enjoyable as well). Are these the people you want to work with?

A Word About Speculative Design

In the past, some museums have requested conceptual design sketches as part of the RFP, but this practice is now generally frowned upon. The National Association for Museum Exhibition (NAME) discourages the solicitation of free or speculative designs in its Code of Ethics. It’s often a counterproductive practice anyway.

I recently heard of a small start-up museum that requested concept sketches from various design firms as part of the RFP process and then complained when it felt the designers had not successfully captured its vision. Exhibit design is a PROCESS. It usually begins with a number of meetings where a host of issues are discussed, including: goals, mission, direction, artifacts,

and audience. Design approaches are batted back and forth. Only then do designers begin sketching ideas.

To add insult to injury, none of the eight firms that submitted designs were awarded work. The museum decided that it couldn’t afford to move ahead with a design consultant. Basic information about “ball park” fabrication costs and design fees is easily determined up-front and should have prevented this wasted effort.

Contract Negotiations

The next step, once you have identified a design firm, is contract negotiation. This inevitably leads to important questions regarding who is responsible for what. What specific tasks will the exhibit designer complete? Will the consultant be responsible for research and content development? Text writing? Photo acquisitions? Illustrations? Graphic design? Collections research? Artifact acquisitions? Artifact conservation? Be realistic about what you and your staff can contribute. Nothing is worse than an overwhelmed staff that either doesn’t have the time or the expertise to fulfill its obligations during the exhibit design process.

Another important consideration in contract negotiation is, will the exhibit go out to bid for fabrication? Or, will it be a design/build project or fabricated within the museum? This affects the kind of design documentation required and can have an impact on design fees. Consider what additional deliverables you may need from the designer—sketches for grant proposals? A model to accompany fund raising efforts? Renderings for marketing collateral? These are considered additional services and are not generally included in a fee-for-exhibit design.

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After there is a contract in place, the real work has just begun. This short article can't cover all the issues related to the exhibit design process, but the following are some questions frequently asked.

How long does the exhibit design process take?

There are so many variables, it's impossible to give a generic answer. Is what's needed only a conceptual design for a grant proposal or complete Construction Documents and oversight of the fabrication and installation? Is all the funding in place? How much research will be required? Are artifacts from your collections are being displayed and have these been selected or is further research needed? Of course, the size and the complexity directly correlate with the time required. If all that's needed is a conceptual design, it may be possible to complete in as little as a month. But to design and build even a small exhibit often takes at least 18 months and more often, two years or more. A schedule can be requested from the exhibit designer as part of the RFP. This is then usually refined and adjusted as the design consultant learns more about the client's needs and the scope of the project.

What is the best way to structure communication between the museum and the designer?

Typically, the museum assembles a core team responsible for the exhibit's development, minimally consisting of the curator and a project manager. Often staff from education, collections, and facilities are included. Directors of exhibitions or programs and executive directors are sometimes team members as well, depending on the size of the project and the museum. To be effective, it's best not to let this

group grow too large—usually no more than five to eight people. Exhibit presentations at the end of each design phase can be done to communicate the progress to a larger audience of stakeholders within the museum community. Within the team, it's best to appoint one primary contact person through whom all the information flows.

What kind of design documents should I expect?

Generally, the designer's work is divided into a number of phases from early Conceptual Design through Construction Documents. Each phase becomes increasingly more specific, with Construction Documents specifying all the relevant design information including the sizes, materials, and finishes of each component. Written specifications are provided indicating the standard of quality for each material and construction technique. If the project is going out to bid, this level of detail is needed to insure each fabricator is bidding “apples to apples.” If the exhibit is a design/build project, the fabricator is a part of the team from the start, and less rigorous drawings are needed from the designer before the fabricator prepares their shop drawings. Written specifications are not done. If the museum has questions about the kind of design documentation they will receive, designers are happy to supply samples of their work from previous jobs.

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