

# 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



	<b>Art</b>	<b>Non-art</b>
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, Spy 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
- Few exhibitions for children and families
- Limited appeal for diverse audiences
- Safe, conservative interpretations
- Subject-specialist perspective dominates
- Rarely considered innovative or creative
- 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

The image shows a vast mountain valley. In the foreground, a small town with several buildings is visible on a hillside. The middle ground is dominated by steep, forested mountainsides. In the background, more mountain ranges are visible, partially obscured by a layer of mist or low clouds. The sky is filled with soft, white clouds. The text 'Exhibition Management' is centered in the upper half of the image in a large, black, sans-serif font.

# 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
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# As a result...

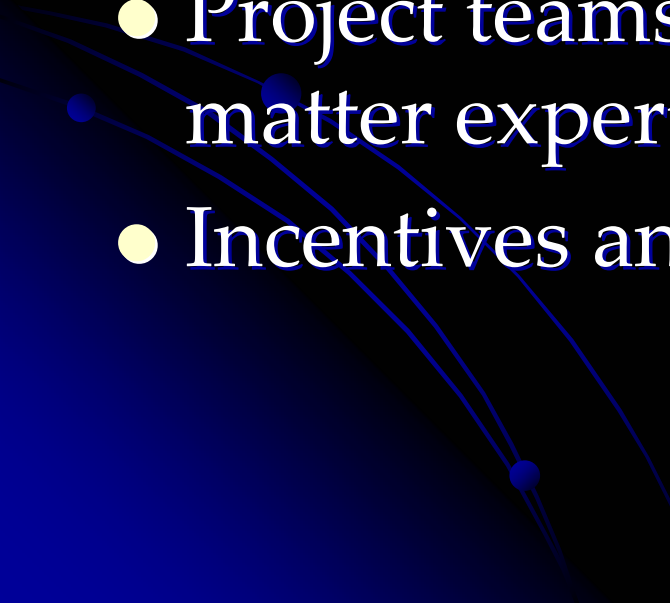
While each unit is subject to limitations and bureaucracy due to the size of SI,

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
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# Processes are Deficient

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



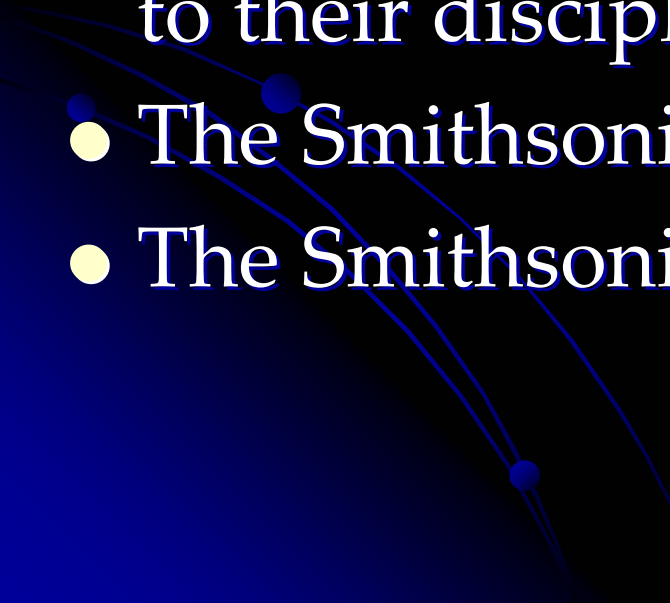
## 5. Sharing Information

- 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
  - The Smithsonian is a public bureaucracy
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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.