Raising the Bar

A Study of Exhibitions at the Smithsonian Institution

Office of Policy and Analysis
January 2005
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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Art</th>
<th>Non-art</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average direct cost*</td>
<td>$90,000</td>
<td>$450,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average size</td>
<td>4,200 sq. ft.</td>
<td>3,400 sq. ft.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average cost/sq.ft.</td>
<td>$19.40</td>
<td>$91.89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*FY1999-2000
Exhibition 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
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 museums or 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
- The Smithsonian is a public bureaucracy
Improvement Requires Leadership

To provide clear guidance

To foster coordination and support

To alter longstanding habits
The path to excellence is worth the climb.