



Five Challenges for Marketing Traveling Exhibitions to Professionals

by Agnès Ruiz

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In this crowded exhibitions market it is getting harder and harder to be singled out and to implement an effective business to business (B2B) marketing strategy.

Almost every museum has a story about traveling exhibitions: many have hosted them, and many have created traveling exhibitions of their own. Traveling exhibitions are a key asset for museums and science centers: they help attract and expand audiences, they generate partnerships, and they are a source of financial revenues. Exporting these exhibitions is a guarantee of national and international visibility. Creating an exhibition for travel, no matter its size or nature, is always an exciting and challenging story! A common export product for the last 20 years, traveling shows are becoming ever more competitive. It is a niche market which is also a mature one. In such tight conditions how do we differentiate and innovate? These questions are especially important since most clients for traveling shows are museum professionals who are selling their own touring exhibitions. How do we deal with hard-to-convince clients/competitors? In this crowded exhibitions market it is getting harder and harder to be singled out and to implement an effective business to business (B2B) marketing strategy. Following are five significant challenges to tackle in creating a competitive traveling exhibition marketing strategy aimed at other professionals.

Challenge 1: Know Your Competitors

The well-known dictum says “Always know your enemies” (or at least your competitors!). To get your own exhibitions noticed in the market it is necessary to seek inspiration from those who are doing it better. It’s also important not to duplicate topics that may be popular but are already in the market.

RSS feed aggregators (many of them are

free) help to check what is new on the essential websites: museum networks, big institutions, and influential bloggers. It is necessary to gather all this information, organize, analyze, and share it with all colleagues working with traveling exhibitions. One can create a database where all the precise information one can get about traveling exhibitions on the market is organized: services offered, prices, surface area, previous hosts, etc. Then it will be easier to isolate what competitors are doing well and to improve the way you are marketing your own products to professionals.

Challenge 2: Understand the Clients’ Needs

When an idea pops out of an exhibition designer’s mind, it is essential to evaluate its touring and marketing potential right away. Another benefit of the strategic monitoring of the competition discussed above is that marketing trends can be detected. For example, it appears that the most successful traveling exhibitions not only have great scholarship value, they also have “marketability” (Buck and Allman Gilmore, 2003). For example, the National Geographic Society produces highly successful traveling exhibitions because they know how to mix scholarly interest with appealing topics: everyone worldwide dreams about Cleopatra or an adventurous archaeologist like Indiana Jones (National Geographic, 2012) and the treatment of the topic can fit a great variety of venues (science centers, art museums, etc.). One of the biggest challenges of marketing your exhibition towards professionals is never forgetting the audience as the final consumer. A poor exhibition, even exquisitely designed and marketed, won’t last! Some complex topics (such as

sexuality, violence, etc.) may be difficult to sell in some areas due to cultural differences; or some of your targets may not have the same expectations concerning your exhibition (e.g. public or private museums compared to shopping malls). Your marketing plan might require slight changes in order to address these differences.

Challenge 3: Maintain Visibility in the Jungle of the Web

Digital and web materials are nowadays necessary; at least every institution has a section about traveling exhibitions within its website. A well-designed website specially produced for the exhibition is a great marketing tool: it can include pictures, exhibition content, and multimedia games based on the exhibits. Some possibilities:

- Items such as teasers or videos are effective when well done, but a budget of about \$6,500-\$13,000 is needed. See the amazing video-teasers about the *Star Wars Identities* exhibition (Montreal Science Center, 2012) or the *Bon Appétit* video (Universcience, 2010).
- Engaging titles that can be understood worldwide and in a second can attract attention on the web: for example *Water H2O = Life* (American Museum of Natural History, 2007), which is easy to translate.
- Simple online brochures, with a nice sense of humor, can be helpful. For example, Heureka in Finland developed a promotional leaflet about the *Dinosaurs* exhibition, with a dinosaur saying “Hire me!”



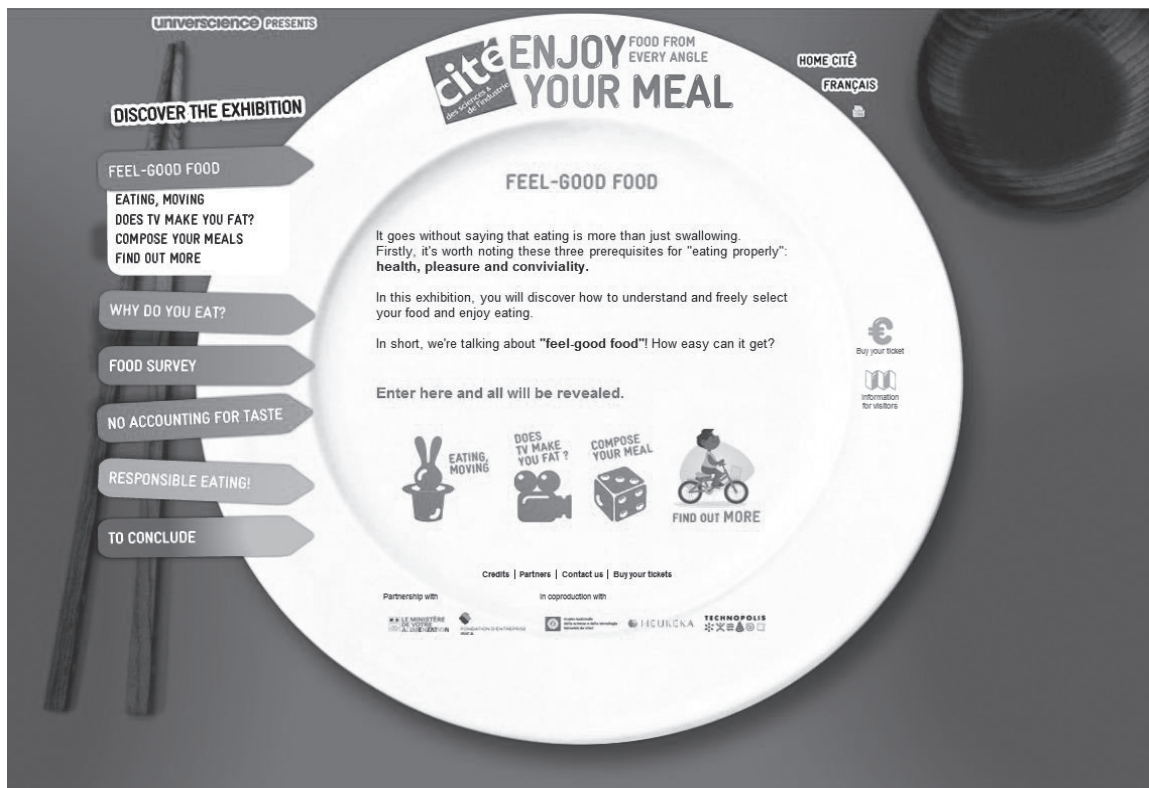
Dinosaurs exhibition leaflet by Heureka, Finland. www.heureka.fi.

- For more interactivity, adding QR codes on your website pages or printed promotional material will allow the prospective client to get immediate basic information on his mobile phone: your marketing packet, availability schedule, size, technical requirements, rental fee and so on.

But before making them available on a USB key or downloadable on your website (see Smithsonian Institution or Natural History Museum of London as examples), how can you call attention to your traveling exhibition?

Using the museum professional networks will help: exhibition databases such as ILE (Informal Learning Experiences Database), Extra database from the ECSITE network (European network of Science Centers and Museums) or even Exhibitions on Tour International database will help you overcome search engine flaws of SEO (search engine optimization). In looking for information, most people type some key words in a search engine toolbar: even with a low budget of about \$100, it may be necessary to “buy” some key words to ensure that someone looking for “science traveling exhibitions” will click on your website appearing in the first three results before

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Screenshot from the Universcience hors les murs (traveling exhibitions) Facebook page. Retrieved November 2011.

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your competitors. But in order to ensure the touring exhibitions visibility, as search engines are now focusing on Web 2.0 (social media optimization), institutions should also work on social media.

Challenge 4: Make Your Point with Direct Marketing

Direct marketing needs a CRM (Customer Relationship Management) database. An e-mailing campaign with a current and detailed database can be highly effective if it is designed for a specific target and if there is a follow-up call. All your interactive efforts on the Internet will be enhanced through e-mailings that redirect potential clients to the website or online catalogues. E-mailings can be quickly sent as updates, for the availability schedule of your touring exhibition, for example, or communicating about your brand new exhibition, as Universcience is doing (2010). The results are better when receivers share them by e-mail and on social media, creating a Web snowball effect, from direct marketing to viral marketing. Direct marketing is also as simple as a phone call: a lively reminder is better than sending huge e-mail or text

message waves!

Challenge 5: Utilizing Social Media With Professionals

Many museums and cultural institutions already promote their activities to audiences through social media: blogs, Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, Tumblr and so on. But few of them think to create a parallel communication with professionals. Those social media tools can be a lively way to do marketing. They permit you to interact in a convivial way with your clients and the general audience, to tell them what happens behind the scenes of your traveling exhibitions, talk about the exhibition projects, and observe how they react. All of these can be part of a social media marketing strategy, which takes a lot of time to be well managed. A parallel blog feeding a Facebook page, such as the one by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES), may be a good alternative. Communicating in a more informal way is what everyone is expecting today: we have gone from a vertical to a horizontal communication process. As social media are free, the fact is that you might get

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some fans that are not part of your initial target of professionals: having a page only for professionals might be ideal, and in any case, all the readers might be potential purchasing advisors!

Specialized social media websites such as ExhibitFiles (www.exhibitfiles.org) or Museum Network (www.museumnetwork.com/) are challenging marketing professionals. Those websites are a good way to promote touring exhibitions and find potential co-producers and partners: they provide professional expertise about exhibitions and allow interactions through comments between members. One cannot market directly on these sites, but writing some reviews or case studies about your exhibitions is a good way to promote them even without the intention of doing it.

The Final Challenge: Clarify Your Focus

All these challenges will be hard to tackle without a clear positioning. What will be yours: a brand (British Museum, Smithsonian Institution), scientific expertise (Musée du Louvre, National Geographic Society) or even originality

(One Drop, Dialogue in the Dark)?

This positioning has to link up all the elements of the marketing strategy, as the ones seen above: market knowledge, appealing products, visibility, effective direct marketing and social media optimization. All of those elements need to be coherent and all the effort made in taking up those challenges will not be effective without a human factor. Being part of museum networks is essential for being seen. Examples are the International Committee for Exhibition and Exchange (ICEE) at ICOM (International Council of Museums), American Association of Museums, Association of Science and Technology Centers or even ECSITE. Remember that behind those networks there are museum professionals sharing the same passion: making exhibitions for the general audience. Annual conferences are the best place for a “live promotion” of your exhibitions. I have noticed that in B2B markets, clients are more loyal than in the business to consumers’ one. There is nothing better than “real life” relationships to reinforce all the marketing discourses about your traveling exhibitions by building trusting relationships. ✨

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