



# The Event-Driven Museum? Reconsidering the Role of Exhibitions in Tough Economic Times

by Nina Simon

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Imagine taking over as the director of a struggling museum. The institution is on the financial brink. The community is largely unaware of or uninterested in its work. In your first week, you lay off one staff member and ask the entire rest of the team (including yourself) to take 20% salary cuts. You zero out the marketing budget. You drop the free food at events. You go line by line in the budget like a crazed surgeon, cutting whatever you can.

That's the position I was in when I became the director of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History in May 2011. In the months following, we turned our institution around by making radical changes to how we do our work. We questioned long-held assumptions about why people come to museums, why donors support them, and how we could most effectively enact our strategic plan. Over the following year, our experimental approach helped us more than double our attendance, increase membership by 30%, and stabilize finances. We figured out how to start making the museum work for the community. What haven't we figured out? The role and value of exhibitions in this new model.

Our vision is to be "a thriving, central gathering place where local residents and visitors have the opportunity to experience art, history, ideas, and culture." There is no indication in this vision statement of how we ought to enact this gathering place, no bias towards exhibitions or educational programs or art classes or historical reenactment. I came in wide open to the possibilities. I knew that we had to quickly and dramatically reframe our relationship with community

members. We had to introduce Santa Cruz residents to the museum and show them that we could be a relevant, exciting cultural hub. And we had to do it with no money.

## Experimenting with Events

How do you activate a space quickly without a budget? You do it with programs and events. (Note: I use those two terms interchangeably.) We knew it would take time and money to upgrade our exhibitions and add interactivity to the physical space, but we could do it immediately, cheaply, and with high visibility by inviting artists, historians, and performers to come in and engage with visitors through events. Events enabled us to partner with groups who brought their own audiences with them and to craft programmatic experiences explicitly for them. We turned a place where "nothing happens" into a place where something was often happening. We got media attention each time we hosted an event, and within a year, we were celebrated by the local weekly as "a major go-to hotspot... that keeps things fresh and fuels the creative fires of Santa Cruz" (2012, April).

My initial strategy was that we would spend our first year focusing on events, while at the same time working behind the scenes to make our exhibitions more participatory, multi-disciplinary, and compelling. I theorized that we would introduce people to the museum through events, and that they would then come back for more traditional daytime experiences. I expected that it would take some time, but that our daytime visitation would double or triple based on people's newfound interest in the museum.

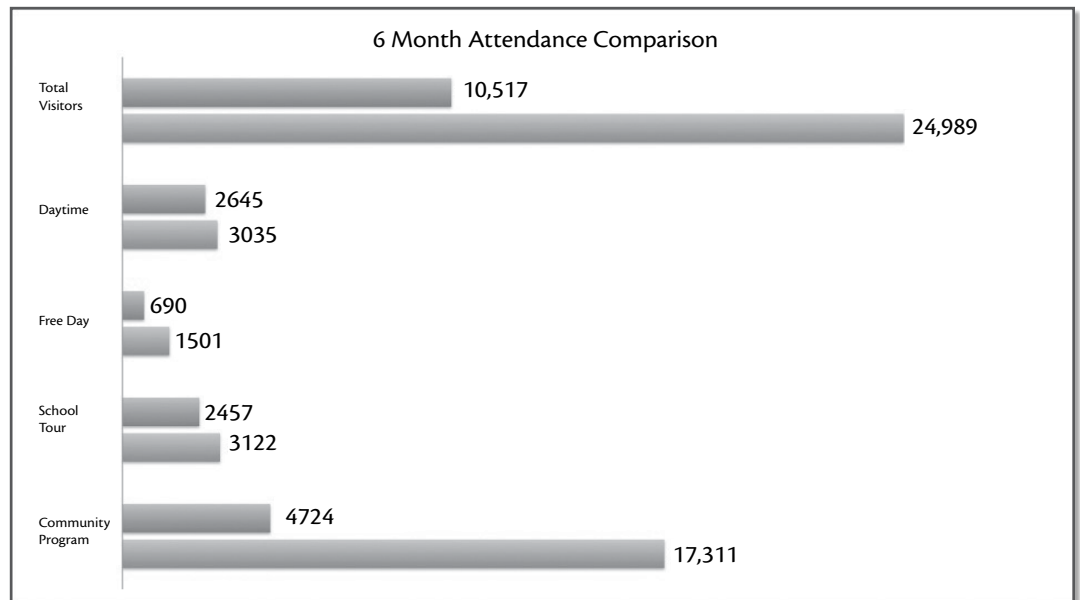


Figure 1. Attendance in first six months of 2011 and for same period in 2012. The upper bar is 2011 and the lower bar is 2012.

Now, a year later, we've made big strides towards our exhibitions becoming more interactive, friendly places to be. But daytime attendance hasn't shifted, or at least, it hasn't happened yet. Figure 1 illustrates what our attendance looked for the first six months of 2011, compared to the first six months of 2012.

As you can see, our attendance during this six-month period increased by 120%. The lion's share of this increase—86%—occurred through community programs or events. The vast majority of visitors have attended and do attend through events. Whereas in 2011, we had one big event on the first Friday of the month, in 2012, we'd expanded to three community events. These events are the key to our growth. While our overall visitation has increased by over 100% for the year, daytime visitation has barely budged.

There are several possible explanations for this.

- Culturally, we may be shifting to a more event-driven society. Recreational time is down, people are more scheduled than ever, and “casually” visiting a museum is irrelevant to many people, especially those who live outside

large urban cultural centers. Festivals—whether of jazz, visual art, ethnic identity, or historic reenactment—are experiencing record attendance even as more permanent institutions that serve the same content are struggling. People want to come for *the* weekend, *the* moment, *the* event.

- We could be too early in the experimentation to be making judgments about whether visitors' interest in the museum is solely tied to events. People certainly experience exhibitions during events—and enjoy them. Many events with minimal programming could be seen as culturally-appealing gateways to exhibitions.
- Audience behavior could be more driven by museum hours than by the type of activity offered. Events happen (mostly) in the evening or on weekends, outside of work time. The majority of our exhibition hours do not. However, it is worth noting that a Saturday without an event during daytime hours typically draws half as many visitors as a Saturday with even a very low-key drop-in program.

What haven't we figured out? The role and value of exhibitions in this new model.

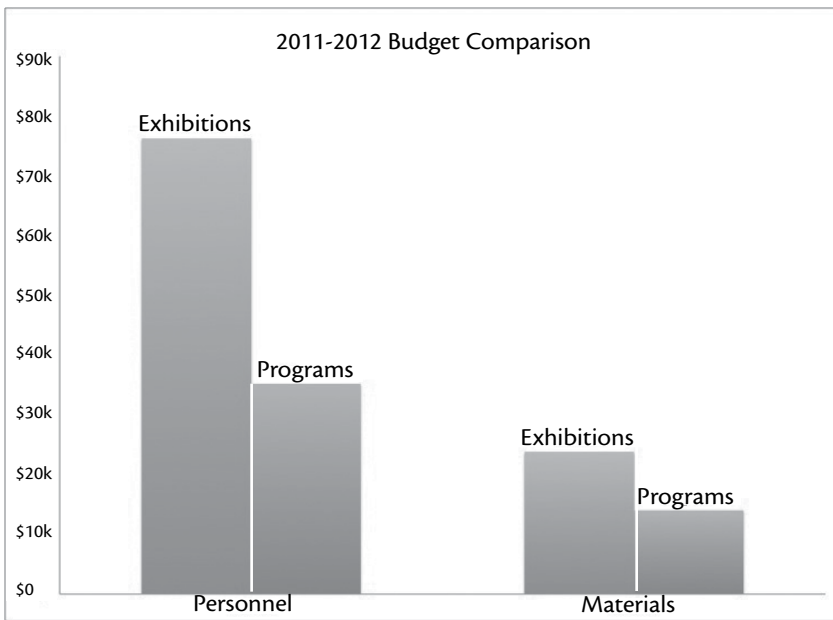


Figure 2. Budget for 2011-12 fiscal year comparing personnel and materials costs for exhibitions and programs.

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- Events generate media buzz and attention with greater frequency than exhibitions. The more events we do, the more we get known for events, and the more people attend during them.
- Our new approach to exhibitions—making them more participatory, social, and interactive—could be wrong-headed. It's possible daytime attendance is staying flat while event attendance increases because the exhibitions aren't very good. I feel this is unlikely given the number of effusive visitor comments, press write-ups, and letters we've received about the new interactivity in the exhibitions. However, it's certainly true that a few of our more traditional visitors (who may have been more likely to visit during the day) are less thrilled with the new exhibitions.

Regardless of how we interpret the causes and meaning of this attendance pattern, it has led me to rethink the balance and roles of exhibitions and programs more broadly. As someone who was trained as an exhibit designer in science and children's museums, I've always assumed that the daytime, exhibit-mediated

experience IS the primary museum experience. But recent conversations have introduced me to many art, history, and children's museums, large and small, where event-based attendance is dominant. My suspicion is that even in organizations with a comparable attendance pattern to ours, the dominant mindset is "we are a museum of exhibitions that also provides programs" as opposed to "we are a museum that produces programs and also has exhibitions." I know that's the paradigm I've always employed, despite seeing the huge spikes that museums of all sizes experience for specific events—heritage days, late nights, Dia de los Muertos, art festivals, Chinese boat races.

And events aren't just about mass attendance. We program MAH events to be highly mission-driven, participatory experiences that often showcase our institutional goals more coherently than exhibitions do. We bring together artists, community groups, historians, and makers of all kinds to demonstrate their work, lead participatory workshops, and engage visitors in cultural activities. These events aren't one-offs that reach audiences that will never return. People who come to events become members and return... for more events. Our membership is up 30%, and most of those new members have joined during or because of an event. We've also brought in several new donors who are excited about the opportunity to sponsor events that reached targeted audiences of interest to them.

The bottom line is that events have been proven, at least in our limited experience, to be high-value, high-impact ways to engage people with our mission and our content.

### Budgeting for a New Balance

Now, consider the cost side of the picture. Ignoring the overhead required to manage and maintain a museum facility, we are spending twice as much money on exhibitions as we are on programs. Figure 2 shows how our hard costs—personnel and materials—shook out for exhibitions versus community programs over the past twelve months.

Why do exhibitions cost so much more than programs? In our case, it's mostly due to the personnel involved. We have 1.5 curators (the second person spends the other half of her time as collections manager), versus one director of community programs. We work with a contract preparator to mount exhibitions, whereas programs are completely supported by unpaid interns and volunteers. As you can see from these figures, we're a pretty low-budget operation overall. We spend very little to develop and produce our exhibitions—just enough to paint the walls, design some simple interactives, and manage the transportation of regional art on our own. It's not the amount we're spending that I question. It's the balance between exhibitions and programs.

So here's the question: what should we be spending on what? I don't think of exhibitions and events as directly in conflict with each other, but when the resources get tight, the scalpels come out. Should we provide more resources to events, which are clearly making a strong connection with the community? If we spent less on exhibitions, would it negatively impact visitor attendance and engagement? If visitors primarily experience our institution via events,

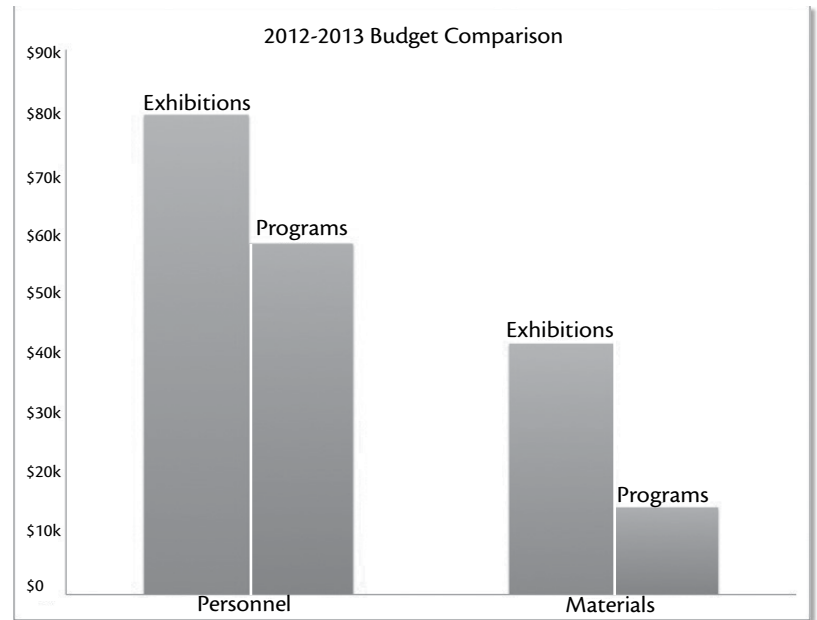


Figure 3. 2012-13 Budget comparing personnel and materials costs for exhibitions and programs for the upcoming year.

how should that change the way we design and market our exhibitions?

### Designing Exhibitions in an Event-Driven World

In some ways, it's more interesting to step back from the direct questions about money and examine the underlying assumptions about how museums function. If our culture is fundamentally shifting towards an event-based model for making recreational choices (as I believe it is), we might need to consider a different model for exhibitions entirely, staging them as a progressive sequence of events, or as a platform punctuated by short-term installations. While I know of several museums that design exhibitions to evolve over their run (mostly due to visitor participation), I don't know of any that deliberately plan for "spiky" attendance. Are there exciting moments in the life of an exhibition that could be highlighted as events? Would it be reasonable to have an exhibition that is experienced at 60% quality during most of the week and at 100% quality at a weekly event?

We don't like to think about exhibitions as having "high quality" and "low quality" operating modes, but of course, they do. Some exhibitions are best experienced with just a few people around. Others are delightful at peak attendance. One of our biggest challenges

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**Reference:**

Archer, G. (2012, April 25). Best of Santa Cruz. *Good Times*. Retrieved on August 17, 2012 at <http://www.gtweekly.com/index.php/good-times-cover-stories/3735-the-2012-santa-cruz-county-readers-poll.html>

If visitors primarily experience our institution via events, how should that change the way we design and market our exhibitions?

at the MAH in planning exhibitions is the spikiness of our attendance. Fridays are our big event days. It's typical to have twelve visitors on a Thursday and then twelve hundred visitors on Friday. The concept of designing for an average number of visitors is nonsensical if that average is never actually present.

We end up weighing the tradeoffs between designing exhibitions that support our events and designing exhibitions that offer a daytime alternative to events. It's incredibly difficult to decide which group gets priority—the high volume of visitors who come to events, or the lower number who attend at other times. Design choices that create a positive, engaging, and safe experience for one rarely serve the other well. We feint with various patches. We mount “base” exhibitions that provide enough room to offer additional workshops and in-gallery experiences during events. We restock areas that invite visitor contribution before each big night so new people can participate. We keep public spaces and walls open for pop-up exhibitions that go up for a night or a weekend at a time.

Does all of this matter to visitors? We find that visitors often conflate exhibitions and events. There are many events that are experienced as short-term exhibitions: art festivals, the Maker Faire, any number of history festivals. We frequently receive phone calls from community members asking “when is the fire exhibition?” or “where is the bike exhibition?” When we explain that it's actually an event on Friday from 5-10pm, they are satisfied. They got the information they needed. They know when the thing they want is happening, and they are comfortable with the idea that it is a

one-night-only opportunity.

If we were brave, we might consider creating some galleries that are wholly for events, and others that are closed during events. But with only 6,000 square feet of exhibition space, we're reticent to do either. We want our event attendees to engage with the exhibitions. But we're not ready to be an entirely event-driven venue in terms of how we plan, program, and staff our institution.

This takes us back to the money question. After a year of extreme cuts, we're now building back to a much stronger financial position. With a \$300,000 surplus for the year and a new campaign underway, we're ready to grow... somewhat. Figure 3 shows what our personnel and materials budget looks like for the upcoming 2012-2013 year.

We are boosting budgets on both the exhibitions and the programs side next year by about \$20,000 each. Relative to each other, that means programs will go from 50% of the exhibitions budget to 60%. From a staffing perspective, we will increase from one to two community programs staff members, while exhibitions staffing will stay flat. But exhibitions will get more funding for design work, installation, and interactivity.

Lack of funds is a powerful catalyst for innovation. Extra funds, however, are a catalyst for “AND” experimentation. We don't have to make an either/or determination at this point. We can keep exploring the question of how exhibitions and events can coexist symbiotically. Is it possible that we will make a radical decision down the line? Definitely. But for now, we're open to the possibilities. ✨