

# Nuts and Bolts

## Traveling Exhibition at the End of its Run?

## Now What?

by Courtney Gilbert with Norma Henry

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You have a blockbuster exhibition....It has completed its original run and tour extension. Now what?

**Y**ou have a blockbuster exhibition. It has leased again and again, leasing so well, that its tour was extended by two years. It has completed its original run and tour extension. Now what? That was the question Science North faced in 2009. Having started our traveling exhibition business in 2002 by launching *Discovering Chimpanzees: The Remarkable World of Jane Goodall*, a 6,000 sf traveling exhibition, and a year later touring *The Climate Change Show*, a 3,000 sf exhibition, we were faced with decommissioning not one, but two exhibitions simultaneously.

We would like to share what we learned, and how we have now applied this to our future decommissioning strategies to ensure efficient and profitable tour completions. Developing and implementing plans for decommission at the time of creating an exhibition is invaluable. This planning allows for accurate budget forecasting, possible sell offs, refurbishment, environmental impact planning, and proper documentation. As we experienced the decommissioning of two of our most successful traveling exhibitions we learned a lot, and were surprised on more than one occasion. Though we thought we had anticipated the exhibition's wrap-up, we soon realized there were several unforeseen challenges and opportunities.

### It's All in the Budget

Budgeting for the wrap up phase of your traveling exhibition during development is a key step to ensuring successful decommissioning. This type of budget forecasting will eliminate scrambling to find funds in your budget or shifting funds from one project to another. A

practice we have adopted is to reserve funds within each project budget for decommissioning any new traveling exhibition Science North creates.

Life on the road is hard on exhibitions, and being able to identify exhibit components that will not be able to stand up to this wear and tear is important. Some expenses to anticipate include return transportation to your venue or off-site location, possible storage costs (if shipping to off-site location), internal technician and project manager labor expenses, equipment rental costs and disposal fees/bin rentals. You should plan to recycle or repurpose computer stations, interactives, screens, and monitors, by contacting local donation centers. It is helpful to establish a cutoff date for an extended tour and a final decommission date, which is reflected in the tour schedule.

### Put It on Paper

What parts of the exhibition belong to whom? Articles that were on loan or borrowed from collections outside of your own must be documented during all stages of development. Updating must be constant during the tour to ensure that all information is captured. When proper documentation is completed in advance it eliminates confusion about ownership during decommission. Documenting up front what has been loaned to the project takes a lot less time than having to do it after the fact. We have tried to backtrack, and it is always tough. The process from concept to decommission could take up to a decade, and memories will not last that long! Think of documentation as an ongoing process to keep track of what has been returned and what still remains. Follow-up paperwork documents returned

loans, and those that remain must also be reflected in the final report. Documenting the licensing of images and video is critical at the front end of development, as it is important to renew these licenses should you extend the tour or sell off exhibit components.

### To Sell or Not to Sell?

We know you and your team invested significantly in the creation and touring of a high quality traveling exhibition that was enjoyed by millions of happy visitors. Yet you need to come to terms with the fact that the exhibition's days are numbered. We know you put your blood, sweat, and tears into its production; we know you and your team spent years of your life selling leases, setting it up, striking it, shipping it, promoting it...but it needs a proper wrap-up! Be realistic about items you want to keep, elements that can be re-purposed or re-used for your facility. These can be identified at the start of the tour and can include lighting, scientific equipment, monitors, A/V equipment, and road cases.

### Selling off Individual Components

We discovered with decommissioning *Discovering Chimpanzees: The Remarkable World of Jane Goodall*, and *The Climate Change Show* that parceling off and selling exhibit components is very challenging. The exhibits were developed and intended to be part of a whole. That being said, there may be opportunities where individual exhibits may be the perfect fit as an added-value experience to an existing gallery elsewhere.

Plan ahead to decide on the exhibit parcels, and their cost for purchase



Acrylic walls designed with repurposing in mind. LED lighting, as pictured in the stylized reeds, is a new exhibition standard. All photos courtesy Science North.

and installation. Marketing the sale of components needs to be done at least six months prior to decommissioning, as the sale or no sale directly affects your wrap-up plan. Be aware: the licenses for images and video footage were likely negotiated without permanent or extended installations in mind. These are generally negotiated for 10 years, which the purchaser would need to renew as an added ongoing expense.

While dedicating a lot of effort to packaging and marketing elements from both of our exhibitions, we did not sell any components. The components from one exhibition were stored at our facility for 12 months in the hopes of finding them a new home, but when they remained homeless, we disposed of them. What we learned from this was to have a plan in place up front to reduce costly storage fees, which could create a different set of outcomes.

### Life on the Road

Science North has done a lot of work to establish traveling exhibition standards and documentation that include a planned and budgeted refurbishment schedule. These include scheduled replacements of surface finishings, graphics, A/V equipment, computers, hardware as

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Design team for Wildlife Rescue discussing green design.

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well as updating science content. During regular tour installs, touchups are completed to keep the exhibition in top shape. When the tour run gets extended, we plan to use one 3-month tour slot to bring the exhibition home or source out a warehouse on the road where it can be refurbished in anticipation of extra leases. Our approach to tour schedule extension has included an evaluation of visitor experience to determine what exhibits should be removed, added, or revised. The original exhibition may also be reduced in size to accommodate venues with smaller exhibition spaces, allowing you to tap into a whole new market of potential clients. The value and quality of the exhibition that showcases your brand needs to remain true to your initial goals. As the exhibition has a shelf life, this step is integral in ensuring a quality visitor experience.

After its refurbishment and extended tour, *The Climate Change Show* was

decommissioned on the road; originally traveling in two 53 ft trailers, it was brought home in one cube van. We sold off metal components and disposed of well-worn items at the offsite warehouse. Many of the things that were brought back were materials such as lighting or equipment that we could repurpose.

### Thinking Green

Rethink, reduce, reuse, and recycle...those are the cornerstones of lowering your exhibition's environmental impact, and finding ways to build on these is critical. For the decommissioning of *The Climate Change Show* we were able to recycle and sell to a scrap metal dealer a significant amount of material. This allowed us to deal with the bulk of the exhibitions infrastructure while we were in the host city, as well as achieving some revenue to offset the decommissioning expenses.

During the design and fabrication phases, think about what materials can be used that are environmentally friendly. Do some advance legwork, research green products and suppliers, and plan to use them for the fabrication. Have a chat with your existing supplier as he may be aware of greener products and initiatives that you haven't heard about. Planning to use these types of products during fabrication will ensure that your decommissioning is that much smoother and greener. *You can find much of this information in Lean and Green, the Spring 2008 issue of Exhibitionist, online at [www.name-aam.org](http://www.name-aam.org). The Editor.*

Rethink the ways in which you pack, crate, and ship your exhibits for maximum use of space while touring. Even better, make a design goal to



Theater seating doubles as storage crates to effect minimal crating.



Science North's newest traveling exhibition Wildlife Rescue utilizes many new standards.

minimize the number of trucks used for transportation. Your clients will appreciate the cost savings, and it will make decommissioning that much easier and more cost effective. We have set a new standard for a maximum number of three (down from four) 53 ft trailers for each new traveling exhibition we create. We have been able to achieve this by capitalizing on minimal crating when planning to pack the exhibition. Our newest exhibition, *Wildlife Rescue*, is gearing up to head on the road, and we have utilized components in the exhibition to achieve minimal crating by having theater seating double as storage crates. For the future, Science North has adopted standards for crates and packing materials in accordance with the International Standard for Packaging Materials (ISPM) 15 regulations for wood packaging. Along with crating we have exhibits that travel with moving blankets and rolling carts.

### To Wrap Up

A word of caution regarding decommissioning. If you plan to execute your decommissioning immediately after the last leasing venue, do not start throwing out the exhibition in their parking lot! A client who has paid a lease fee will not appreciate seeing the exhibition handled this way right after the lease has ended.

Although it can be difficult to switch gears from “blue sky” development thinking to identify measures for decommissioning an exhibition, it will pay off for you and your clients in the end. Make it a must in the development plan; you will find it saves time and effort to create a decommissioning plan up front, making your exhibition more profitable and successful in the end. ✨

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