



Greater Than its Parts: Exhibition Collaborations for Small Museums

by Paul Pearson

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*You can't always get what you want
But if you try sometimes, well you just
might find you get what you need.*
(Jagger & Richards, 1969)

Partnerships and collaborations between multiple organizations are among the most difficult and thorniest activities contemporary museums attempt on a regular basis. In a world where conversation and consensus are standard procedure, it is tough enough for members of a single organization, however clear its mission, to agree among themselves on strategy and implementation of necessary projects. This article explores why some small museums opt into complex partnerships for creating and disseminating interactive traveling exhibitions for family audiences. And why some opt out.

Most museums use external services or academic partners in the development and manufacture of significant exhibition projects. Topical affinities, complementary resources, funding opportunities and shared business objectives motivate many museums to form temporary partnerships with others to develop traveling exhibitions on a project-by-project basis. Some institutions have accumulated impressive rosters of products for rent in this way. Collaborations take many forms. The accompanying brief by Alexander Goldowsky and Betsy Loring of the EcoTarium succinctly describes a range of collaborative models organized to produce and share exhibitions. (Goldowsky and Loring, 2012).

I focused on long-term exhibition collaboratives involving four or more

small-to mid-sized museums as equal partners. Three such entities, Youth Museum Exhibit Collaborative (YMEC), Environmental Exhibit Collaborative (EEC), and Traveling Exhibits at Museums of Science (TEAMS) are variants of partnerships that Goldowsky and Loring classify as either "Build and Swap" or "Collective Development" collaborations. I spoke with several senior managers intimately involved with overseeing their museum's participation in these collaborative partnerships to understand if there was a common rationale for undertaking collaborations and if these strategic goals were borne out by their experience.

- What were the leaders' assumptions going in?
- What factors were important to their decisions to participate?
- Did the goals and structure of the collaborative change over time?
- Who would ultimately benefit from the collaboration?

The Need for Change on the Floor

Perhaps the most compelling factor motivating leaders to consider traveling exhibition partnerships was the perceived need for frequent change on their exhibition floors. Program decision makers shared a consistent understanding that their audiences appreciated new experiences to complement their continuing engagement with "old favorites" at their institutions. By the time Boston Children's Museum was contemplating joining YMEC in 2002, it had already initiated an independent

traveling exhibition program and a space for visiting exhibitions. Neil H. Gordon, then Boston's Chief Operating Officer, was attracted to YMEC as an "affordable alternative to rentals that would provide audiences with something fresh to spark their curiosity and reinforce the value of regular visits." When I asked several leaders if the same objective could be accomplished by renting any of the hundreds of exhibitions available through the dozens of well-known traveling exhibition clearinghouses, their responses were strikingly similar. Managers were frustrated with the options available for smaller museums on the open market. David Goudy, Executive Director of Montshire Museum of Science in Norwich, VT, and a founding member of the TEAMS exhibit collaborative, said:

Before TEAMS, our museums were essentially consumers of traveling exhibitions. We found that very few affordable, high quality rentals were available for smaller museums with limited budgets and limited space. Popular blockbusters are too expensive and too big. TEAMS was formed in 1996, in part, as a response to the thinness of the marketplace at that time.

Supporting Family Learning

Aggressively promoted visiting exhibitions may stimulate interest among potential new audiences but, surprisingly, none of the interviewees felt that driving attendance was a high-level objective for collaboration. Leaders were more concerned with providing quality experiences for visitors as a primary outcome. Gail Ringel, Vice President, Exhibits at Boston Children's Museum,



Members of the Environmental Exhibit Collaborative (EEC) working with prototypes during a development meeting for the traveling exhibition *Tree Houses*. Photo by Don Biehl, courtesy of Ecotarium, Worcester, MA.

who serves on the YMEC board of directors, related a recent encounter:

I was in our featured exhibit's gallery recently to check out one of our YMEC exhibitions and came across a young mother busily playing with her two children. I asked if they'd seen the previous (non-YMEC) visiting exhibition, an expensive blockbuster based on a perennially popular motion picture, she said: "Yes, we enjoyed that, but this one is so much better!"

The mother's preferred exhibition, *Building Brainstorm*, developed by the Brooklyn Children's Museum expressly for YMEC, features no media superstars and no characters from popular children's books or fantasy films. Its theme investigates the comparatively prosaic subjects of architecture and interior design, yet it is done in a way that invites and rewards prolonged engagement. Ringel concluded, "YMEC exhibitions are produced by organizations that understand how children and families operate in a museum environment. The exhibitions are subject to rigorous peer review by museum professionals with a real stake in their success." Neil Gordon

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Overview of the completed Tree Houses exhibition on display at the EcoTarium. The exhibition is now toured by Sciencenter, Ithaca, NY. Photograph by Don Biehl, courtesy of EcoTarium, Worcester, MA.

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addressed a key assumption that is helpful in understanding why hosting blockbuster exhibitions is not a critical audience development strategy for many small museums: “Most people don’t visit children’s museums to see something specific. Families’ objectives for visiting are more generally directed at having a positive social experience around exploring and learning together.”

Value Added: Varying Business Models The Economic Benefits of Collaboration

Several of the leaders felt that the economics of collaboration made sense for them. Ringel explained:

YMEC continues to be part of our strategic effort to engage audiences with a variety of themes and new perspectives, something that is difficult for a museum to do by itself. Fulfilling the need for predictable change in our galleries by sharing exhibitions is less expensive than renting.

Founded in 1990, YMEC has operated continually for 21 years and is now in its fifth round of exhibition development. YMEC members each pay annual dues of \$35,000. Each member designs and builds one 1200sf exhibition per five-year round and receives production grants from YMEC totaling \$120,000.

Members use these grants to supplement their independent fundraising efforts. The exhibitions travel to each member on a staggered release schedule, and the collaborative pays for shipping and insurance. YMEC participants discovered that many independently rented traveling exhibitions of comparable quality, scale and interactivity, cost as much as \$50,000 for a 12-week rental including shipping and insurance. Factoring in a member’s dues and grant returns, the prorated cost to a member for one YMEC exhibition is about \$9,000. Over a five-year period, then, YMEC members get \$250,000 to \$300,000 of rental value for less than \$54,000 of net costs.

Attracting Resources

The TEAMS collaboration adopted a different business model for its three, 4-year rounds of exhibition development. Charlie Trautmann of the Sciencenter of Ithaca, NY and Cynthia Yao of the Ann Arbor Hands-On Museum hatched the idea for TEAMS during a 1994 National Science Foundation proposal workshop in Washington, DC. They reckoned that a consortium of several smaller science centers could demonstrate broader impacts and exert greater leverage to gain funding for collective projects than through individual proposals. They enlisted three other museums with similar objectives: Catawba Science Center, Hickory, NC; Discovery Center Museum, Rockford, IL; and the Montshire Museum of Science, Norwich, VT. Their foundation strategy paid off with a large supporting grant from NSF’s Informal Science Education unit and TEAMS became a functioning reality in 1996 (Trautman, St. John, Goudy et al., 2005).

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Collective Development

Like YMEC and TEAMS, EEC (Environmental Exhibit Collaborative) was founded by several small museums to create and share exhibitions among its membership. (EEC's founding members were: ECHO at the Leahy Center for Lake Champlain, Burlington, VT; EcoTarium, Worcester, MA; Squam Lakes Natural Sciences Center in New Hampshire; Children's Museum and Theatre of Maine in Portland; Museum of Science and Nature, Sherbrooke, Quebec) While YMEC derives its operational funding through member dues, the TEAMS and EEC partnerships support their strategic activities through shared foundation grants. EEC, however, has a very different production model. Alexander Goldowsky, Director of Exhibits and Education at EcoTarium, explained:

The first iteration of EEC was structured around "collective development," where all members would work together on one exhibition at a time, rolling out an exhibition each year over a five-year cycle. Depending on their organizational competencies, individual members played different roles in the process, but all members contributed and learned through each phase of ideation, design, and production.

Although leaders agreed on the business efficacy of exhibition sharing partnerships, they also felt collaborations provided other significant strategic values to members.

Intangible Benefits of Collaboration

EEC has spawned a second iteration called Exhibit Lab that focuses even more

purposely on creating a "community of practitioners" by working together to develop permanent exhibit components as part of the core learning environments on each member's floor. Exhibit Lab, now in the first of three planned years, has four participating museums including three of the original five EEC members: EcoTarium; ECHO Lake Aquarium and Science Center; and the Children's Museum & Theatre of Maine. Neil Gordon, now CEO of the Discovery Museums in Acton, MA, accepted EEC's invitation to join Exhibit Lab, in part, because of his previous experience with YMEC.

Sure, the economics of sharing resources and products makes sense, but I was even more impressed with the value of collaborative process as a staff development tool. Exhibit Lab is a means for us to engage in a thoughtful discussion of what makes a great exhibit and offers an opportunity to test our ideas on the floor.

The Challenge of Change

Even with the benefits of collaboration, each of the partnerships featured in this article have experienced changes in membership between rounds. Contacts at museums which made the choice to leave said that their organizations had benefited from the collaboration and that deciding to exit had been difficult. At their time of departures, most of the museums had recently undergone changes in leadership, or were entering or emerging from major capital expansions. Demanding partnerships were no longer ideal fits with these organizations' new conditions. The Children's Museum of Houston (CMH), a longstanding YMEC stalwart, is a



Constructing the "Great Wall" in *Children of Hangzhou: Connecting with China*, a YMEC exhibition from Boston Children's Museum. Courtesy of Boston Children's Museum.

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case in point. Cheryl McCallum, CMH's Director of Education, offered insight into Houston's exit from the collaborative:

YMEC allowed us to work closely for 15 years with leading children's museums. CMH built expertise as we learned how to build traveling exhibitions and keep them on tour. While we were gearing up for our expansion (completed in 2009) we developed new strategic objectives that reduced our need for YMEC exhibitions. Our *What's New?* temporary gallery is now a birthing ground for developing and testing new CMH exhibits that will help us meet our commitment for continually infusing fresh experiences for audiences throughout our building.

Tracing the evolution of TEAMS over its 12 years of operations reveals a commitment to mentorship, learning and

growth as characteristic of successful long-term collaborations. TEAMS was initially structured to enable individual members to build and circulate exhibitions within the five-member collaborative. TEAMS 2 retained their production goals and intensified professional development activities around the theme of "Universal Design." Participation was also expanded with three new museum partners who were each paired with a veteran TEAMS member. TEAMS 3 added a substantial family learning research component aimed at "developing tools for science museums to use in fostering deeper conversations about science among children and adult visitors" (Trautman, St. John, Goudy et al., 2005, p. 6). TEAMS 3 concluded its work in 2009 when its leadership elected not to pursue continued funding. During our interview, David Goudy reflected the impact of the collaborative:

The exhibitions that TEAMS created met most of our goals for enriching the visitor experience at our respective museums, but the most powerful product was building staff skills and organizational intelligence. TEAMS' real legacy was in increasing all our capacities to execute complex projects of increasing quality and potential to enhance science learning by our audiences.

A summary assessment of TEAMS by Inverness Research (2008) affirms the capacity building outcome of the collaborative:

In the early rounds of TEAMS funding, TEAMS was often the main project that exhibit developers had on their plates. In the final round,

Whereas all the partnerships were initially focused on the tangible output of *producing and sharing exhibitions*, the ultimate desired outcome was *increasing family learning through exhibitions*.

TEAMS was one of many projects that these museums were working on. As one director said: “TEAMS started the whole thing for us. If we hadn’t had the TEAMS project, I don’t think any of the other projects would have happened.” (Inverness Research, et al., 2008, p. 16)

Viewed together, the EEC, TEAMS and YMEC experiences shed light on what may be the most critical strategic outcomes of the collaborations. Whereas all the partnerships were initially focused on the tangible output of *producing*

and sharing exhibitions, the ultimate desired outcome was *increasing family learning through exhibitions*. The ancillary outcome necessary to make this happen was *increasing the capacity of exhibit practitioners and organizations* to produce high quality experiences. The key mechanism for building knowledge and organizational capacity is *the collaboration itself*. For small museums, the short term, physical outcomes (exhibitions) seem less important, certainly less enduring, than the shared learning potential generated through the powerful engine of collaboration. ✨

The author thanks the following colleagues for their generous participation in the interviews that formed the core of this article:

Alexander Goldowsky, Director of Exhibits and Education, EcoTarium, Worcester, MA. <http://www.ecotarium.org/>

Neil Gordon, Chief Executive Officer, The Discovery Museums, Acton, MA. <http://www.discoverymuseums.org/>

David Goudy, Executive Director, Montshire Museum of Science in Norwich, VT. <http://montshire.org/>

Cheryl McCallum, Director of Education, Children’s Museum of Houston, TX. <http://www.cmhouston.org/>

Gail Ringel, Vice President, Exhibits & Production, Boston Children’s Museum, Boston, MA. <http://www.bostonkids.org/>

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For further reading:

For a detailed history and assessment of TEAMS, I highly recommend two fine papers that are publicly available online: Inverness Research: St. John, M., Carroll, B., Helms, J., Robles, D., Stelmah, L., (2008) *Lessons learned from the long-term investment in the TEAMS collaborative*: http://www.inverness-research.org/reports/2009-02-TEAMSIII-completefinal/2009-02_Rpt_TEAMSIII-LessonsLearnedFinal-2008-12.pdf

For information on the TEAMS and EEC exhibition rentals go to: http://www.sciencenter.org/exhibits/d/exhibition_rental_flyer.pdf

For information on the Youth Museum Exhibit Collaborative go to: <http://www.bostonchildrensmuseum.org/ymec/>