



Flux or the New Normal?

Museum Exhibitions in the Post-Recession Reality

by Daniel Spock

Where Are Exhibition Programs Headed in the New Economy? The Jury Is Out.

In 2008, the bubble burst. Overnight, the nation and the world were plunged into economic chaos. The economy shed trillions of dollars of value, and millions of people were pushed into unemployment. How have museums and their exhibition programs weathered the economic storm? Have we reached a new stable state or is the change process still underway? And if it is still underway, where do we think it will lead us?

Can Rapidly Changing Exhibitions Be Sustained?

While a large proportion (40%) of U.S. museums are free, a great number rely very heavily on gate and sales revenue generated by rapidly changing and aggressively marketed exhibitions. The dilemma here isn't complicated. These museums have been measuring their effectiveness largely by the attendance they are able to generate, but generating that attendance isn't cheap. The attendance "bounce" a new exhibition produces lasts only a few months. To produce a succession of rapidly changing exhibitions with broad appeal can be done in two ways: bring in traveling blockbusters, or try to make an equally appealing exhibit in-house. A traditional in-house exhibition at the level of quality necessary to attract a wide audience might take years and millions of dollars to produce. Rental and other fees for blockbusters normally run to six figures: ostensibly a savings over in-house produced exhibits. But a museum must string blockbusters together in a ceaseless line of offerings to keep attendance high, negating some of the putative dollar

value when compared to more permanent exhibits. Necessary marketing can easily add hundreds of thousands to the cost; you have to spend money to make money.

This predicament has caused an especially acute problem for science centers where relatively high admission fees—combined with a heavy reliance upon them for fiscal solvency—have long been a fixture of the business model. The economic pressures of the recession brought this into relief, but the crisis has actually been brewing for some time. ASTC reports that aggregate attendance for science centers actually declined 24% between January, 2006 and July, 2011 (Seidel, 2011). An evaluator at a large urban science center recently told me that the steep decline in attendance at her museum since 2008 is almost entirely due to a decline in visitors traveling great distances to see traveling blockbusters. The rising cost of travel in the new atmosphere of austerity is proving an obstacle to the traditional family excursion.

The crisis might run even deeper than the blockbuster treadmill, however. John W. Jacobsen in the *Informal Learning Review* laments that

The Museum of Science (Boston) has never achieved the annual attendance it earned in the late '80's, despite two and a half decades of professional development and growth in the local population. I am really puzzled by the paradox of our field's increased professionalism and accumulation of research evidence versus our declining operating data—as we 'get better,' we are losing attendance (2012 January-February, p. 28).

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A disconnect between museum and public conceptions of the value and quality of the experience may also be having a deleterious effect.

Bootstrapping Stopgap Strategies?

AAM studies indicate that, perhaps because of their relatively high expense, the recession has affected exhibitions disproportionately to other museum programs. Anecdotally, even in the decades before the recession, there had been a long general decline in funding allocated to staffing for in-house exhibitions as more museums sought to replace the high carrying costs of staff salaries and benefits with outsourcing or temporary hires. Many dispensed with full-service exhibit programs altogether, settling for a bare-bones approach with project managers and contracting administrators to manage new exhibitions. This might have made sense in the previous era dominated by traveling blockbusters, loan shows and outsourced “permanent” exhibitions built as a part of new capital building projects. But, according to AAM, reliance on these exhibition mainstays has slowed significantly since 2008. Instead, many museums are economizing by mounting exhibitions drawn from their own collections and cancelling or slowing the rate of incoming traveling exhibitions (AAM, 2012). If cost comparisons prove favorable, an optimist might see this heralding a renewed commitment to in-house exhibition development and design. On the other hand, this trend could also signal an erosion in compensation levels for remaining in-house exhibit staff along with a more competitive private market for exhibit design and production skills.

The wide adoption of hiring freezes, benefit cuts and staff furloughs, and increased reliance on volunteers by museums since 2008, though these cost saving strategies seem to be slowing now, suggest that bootstrapping—demanding higher productivity from fewer staff at lower levels of professional development and for lower compensation—is an emerging new reality.

James Surowiecki writes in *The New Yorker* that, in the business world, hiring is slack not because businesses don’t need the labor, but because they don’t want to invest in training new professionals (2012, July 9). Since actual museum experience is so critical to the creation of quality exhibits, a future concern is that museums are failing to adequately provide the necessary opportunities for the next generation to master the exhibit craft.

Still, survey data suggest that some museums appear to be trying to claw their way back to the old formula of traveling exhibitions over those produced in-house. Like the big banks, these museums seem to hope that the downturn was just a long and very bad hiccup and that deep structural reform isn’t necessary.

Fast, Cheap, and Good?

Bootstrapping raises important questions of quality. Will the new emphasis on in-house resourcefulness encourage a return to more traditional objects-and-labels only approaches? Or will it foster a flourishing of creativity as scarcity demands new adaptations? It’s quite likely that the answer will be both, given the diversity of institutional values in the field today.

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Some have long been urging the field to recalibrate its expectations, particularly when it comes to expensive exhibitions programs. Kathleen McLean, a widely-published authority on museum exhibition development and design, argued *before* the recession hit that exhibitions are not only too expensive, but take too long to develop. McLean urged museums to experiment more, to iterate and prototype quickly, to take more risks, to ditch the costly, plodding exhibit development cycle that has come to define the “best practice” and to deemphasize the preoccupation with high design finish (McLean, 2007a, 2007b). These ideas are appealing. Yet, in reality some of the time delay can be accounted for by the slow turnaround of the federal grant cycle, with nine months separating applications and approvals. Looking at the budget ledger, a majority of exhibit costs can be tied up in payroll. One caution could be that faster and cheaper exhibition development simply spells yet another pressure to squeeze higher productivity out of people who are already working hard for less and less compensation. If the aphorism: *You can have it fast, cheap or good, pick two*, is true, will it be realistic to speed up, spend less and keep quality high? Or is it just that we have defined quality in the wrong way?

It is also possible that the argument about the comparative costs of outsourcing and in-house exhibitions is completely losing its relevancy. We are seeing more museums experiment with collaborations with artists and other creative producers from outside of the field who can make spectacular things happen, either as in-residence guests, or as partners in the creation of a one-off gallery project. In essence, this is a third way completely

circumventing the old debate. What may be emerging is a far more volatile work market of temporary creative alliances where job security and traditional compensation is the least of anyone’s expectations.

Where Is the Money for New Exhibitions?

In any case, the relative security of the exhibit practitioner is driven by available funding. Whatever source we look at, whether it is public and private foundations, corporations, or individual donors, museum exhibitions seem to be less of a priority. Generally seen as traditional enrichment programs, exhibitions, in many cases, no longer appear to satisfy the sort of rigorous outcomes many foundation funders now seek. A museum exhibition, no matter how great it is, can’t really be shown to help close the achievement gap, advance STEM learning in dramatically measurable ways, or pull people out of poverty. The prevailing perception of this new instrumentalism seems to be that the reach of museum exhibitions is too often wide and shallow rather than deep and transformational.

IMLS, NEH, NEA, and NSF—long the federal museum exhibit funding stalwarts and already the focus of intense and growing grant-award competition among museums—have responded by becoming more particular in choosing exhibition projects to support. One science center colleague told me that NSF has become more leery of museum exhibitions of any kind, reflecting a sense that museums are failing to put forward innovative and high-impact projects.

Rigorous and comprehensive STEM requirements for informal learning make

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these grant awards ever more difficult to justify. And NSF has long been the most handsomely funded of the federal agencies catering to museums. IMLS now awards only about a quarter of its grants to museums versus libraries. NEH puts a ceiling on exhibit grants at less than a quarter of the size of those available at NSF, locking the history museum discipline into a subordinate class compared to science.

Corporations that once saw investments in the local community's cultural scene as an altruistic imperative, for years have been shifting their philanthropy to their marketing divisions with an expectation that the investment reach potential customers as any marketing campaign would. Also, as corporations became less rooted in their home communities and more preoccupied with world markets, local giving seemed expendable. Corporations have calculated that there are better ways to market products than supporting local museum exhibitions.

Another factor is that traditions of individual philanthropy are undergoing seismic generational shifts as Baby Boomers give less, and with less enthusiasm, than their more civic-minded Greatest Generation parents.

If community-based and government funders turn away from museum exhibitions wholesale, it doesn't speak well for their perceived relevance as an essential cultural value. Museums are in a cultural case-making struggle. Some are seeking creative ways to adapt to the new grant guidelines, even bending the mission to make the case for funding. There's evidence that foundations still perceive museum education as a priority. AAM reports

that museums largely spared education programs in their recession budget-cutting strategies, and many actually increased funding (2012). Could this fortify museum educator's long-muted influence in the exhibit development process as well? Perhaps, but one can see the relentless prospect of declining funding for exhibits reinforcing the bootstrapping trend for years to come.

Which Way Flows the Demographic Tide?

Another culminating force for change is the rapid diversification of the population of the U.S. By most projections, the U.S. will become a majority minority nation by 2040. Yet, according to research, museums do a terrible job of attracting minority visitors. Though minorities make up 36% of the U.S. population, they make up only 9% of core, loyal museum goers (Wilkening & Chung, 2009).

Changing this will be critical to the long-term survival of museums. But one-size-fits-all solutions are elusive when it comes to exhibitions. The needs and desires of community segments can prove incredibly divergent; overarching categories like "Hispanic" or "Asian" lend an illusory coherency to the mosaic actuality of communities that may have little in common. Since diversity itself defies mass programming and marketing, museums with scarce resources will have to weigh the benefits of diffused program strategies when seeking to reach diverse audiences with exhibitions. Try sustaining that in times of scarce resources. While museums are arguably getting better at building necessary community relationships, exhibit projects are clumsy, expensive and ephemeral tools for making those relationships visible and sustained.

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What's the Real Impact of New Technology?

Much has been written about the museum in the information age. It's been just as hard to ignore new media in the gallery as it has been to say anything conclusive about it. One thing has been certain: even in a recession new technologies find their way onto the gallery floor in some permutation, and this experimentation seems necessary to the growth of museum practice. The most outlandish fears that online access to images of collections objects would make museum going obsolete have not materialized. There is no evidence that technology has worn away public desire to visit museums. There are success stories about museums using social media to inexpensively promote, and even source content for, exhibitions. But the explosion of mobile pad and smartphone use by the public has not carried over to proven museum adaptations yet. The museum mobile app fad notwithstanding, to date most of them have proven costly to develop, putting custom designed apps out of reach for all but the best supported institutions. The frequency of app use by visitors, at least at the Minnesota History Center, has also been disappointing: roughly about the same that use audio tours, or hovering around 10%, raising skepticism about the return on investment. Since many apps are proprietary, this means that they will stay out of reach even as they are improved. To answer this, do-it-yourself open source mobile platforms are emerging, but the learning curve to adapt them will thwart all but the most able and determined in-house coders.

Also ambiguous is any clear sense of what mobile technology is optimally suited for in the gallery experience. Like audio tours, mobile apps may act to isolate

museumgoers, grating against their desire to interact socially during their visits. Are apps merely another vehicle for audio tours or a new outlet for curators to pile on more information? Are they best used as a wayfinding tool? Can they serve as museum-based gaming interfaces? Or connect classrooms to museums? In an age of scarcity, the novelty of mobile technology can attract some funding, but the usefulness and appeal of these products to museumgoers appears far from certain at this point.

Flux

Looking at these things in aggregate reminds me of the maxim of Heraclitus: *the only constant is change*. It can't be said that museums and their exhibitions programs have reached anything like a stable, post-recession state yet. A very real possibility could be that we are moving into a period of permanent instability—a special challenge for museums which have traditionally been in the continuity business. The sheer expense of new exhibitions inevitably makes them an easy target in any budget reduction scenario. In terms of pay, museum work has never been lavishly rewarded, but the downward pressure on wages, benefits and the consequent shrinking of the middle class across the U.S. seems bound to affect exhibition makers as well. Still, in times like these, necessity can provide the impetus and opportunities for creativity. The rapid diversification of the U.S. population and the irresistible tide of new technology will continue to put pressure on museums to adapt. For mission reasons, few museums can allow their programming to go into suspended animation for long. This fact is sure to produce novel adaptations—even if some of them won't include exhibitions at all. ✨

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