



Crossing Borders: International Traveling Exhibit Issues Shared by The Youth Museum Exhibit Collaborative

by Janet Petitpas

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With goods and services moving more freely and easily across borders, Museums find themselves in the position of having increased access to exhibits from around the world. For Museums that create exhibits for sale or rent, international rentals can bring increased revenue, but may also include increased costs and effort. For the past fourteen years, the Youth Museum Exhibit Collaborative has been traveling exhibits between the United States and Canada.

The Youth Museum Exhibit Collaborative is a group of nine children's museums in North America that share resources and expertise to create high-quality family exhibits that then travel to each member museum. Eight of the museums are located in the United States with one highly valued member, the Canadian Children's Museum, located in Hull, Canada.

As a result of regular exhibit travel to Canada, as well as rental experiences in other countries, the collaborative has learned a great deal about international exhibit travel. Issues that arise are sometimes logistical and sometimes philosophical, requiring thoughtful consideration by all parties.

Addressing logistical concerns at the time of an exhibit's development facilitates the transport and ease-of-use of the exhibit by museums outside the United States. Based on YMEC's experience, we offer the following suggestions:

- Carefully research electrical requirements of the countries receiving the exhibit. Wiring and outlet requirements may vary from country to country.
- Measurements of components and crates should be both in metric and English units.
- Make preparations in advance for expedited border crossing. Truck border crossings to Canada and Mexico can be complicated and can cause major delays in the exhibit's schedule. Always research the required information and forms for border crossing and have those prepared in advance. Verify whether or not CITES paperwork is required for both leaving and re-entering the United States. Independent agents can be hired to assist and can be a great help for staff that are not familiar with border crossing. At the very least, a list with the detailed content of each crate is required along with the value of the crate contents.
- Because of potential border difficulties, it is wise to allow extra time in the transportation schedule. Include a generous amount of time for shipping and installation to guarantee that the exhibit arrives well before the opening.
- E-mail is an essential communication tool. The Bay Area Discovery Museum hosted an exhibit that required daily communication with London. Given the nine-hour time difference between the west coast and Europe, the work hours of our staffs never coincided. Virtually all of our communication was done through e-mail.

Translation and language use across borders is an issue that requires a great deal of time and thoughtfulness. Canada requires by law that communication represented in the National Museum be in



both French and English. Most US members of YMEC prefer that exhibits be in Spanish and English. The result has been that two sets of labels are created for each exhibit: one set in English/Spanish and another in English/French.

The exhibit design itself must be able to accommodate multiple or changeable labels. For exhibit elements that require sound or use written words directly on a pre-fabricated component, three languages are frequently used. In other areas, the labels are affixed so that they can be changed to incorporate an alternate set of labels. One can imagine how the complexity multiplies when more than three languages are in the mix!

Communication with hosting museums is key to a successful experience. If an exhibit is traveling to a foreign museum that is expected to provide translation or new labels, it is important to be very clear in the exhibit agreement who is paying for what and what design guidelines must be followed. For example, the Bay Area Discovery Museum is preparing to host an exhibition, originating in Sweden, of works by a celebrated Swedish children's book illustrator. It has been very helpful to know in advance that we will receive a disc of translated text and that we will need to incur the cost of producing labels with that text. Having a written agreement with all the points delineated makes the process of planning for the exhibition installation much smoother.

The cost of translating text is surmountable, but exhibits with heavy use of technology sometimes pose challenges that make the exhibit too costly for foreign Museums. The collaborative has created exhibits that Canada has had to decline because they contained computer kiosks and video components for which the addition of a second language was cost prohibitive.

Creativity can be used to overcome translation issues while better communicating an exhibit message. When the Canadian Children's Museum created the World Circus exhibit, they used video technology to illustrate how to perform certain circus arts. The videos showed youth performing various circus arts slowly and gradually improving their skill and moving faster. The videos were an excellent way of providing instruction in circus arts for families without the use of language.

As exhibit text becomes more visitor-friendly and contextual, "versioning" text (rather than translating) has also become necessary. Pattern Wizardry, a YMEC exhibit

created by the Brooklyn Children's Museum, contains text that was written completely in rhyme to illustrate a word pattern. Text had to be translated, or versioned, so that the meaning of the label was maintained while keeping the rhyming pattern. Translation/versioning is challenging when the exhibit title or component names are English language idioms without meaning as a direct translation.

Text is not the only written communication that must be translated when exhibits travel long-distance. Consideration must also be given to translating other materials, such as marketing and PR materials, education packets and training documents.

Planning for international travel requires that these issues be incorporated into the exhibit development schedule at the beginning of the project. Production timelines need to include time for translation and production as well as a second round of translation and production should labels change after remedial evaluation. Communication, design and production become more complex as exhibits leave our borders, but the result is well worth the effort.

The marketplace and potential audience for traveling exhibits increases exponentially as museums have the ability to both travel exhibits and host exhibits originating from any country. With careful planning, the experience is enriching for staff and visitors alike.



Pattern Wizardry was created for the Youth Museum Exhibit Collaborative by the Brooklyn Children's Museum with support from the National Science Foundation.