

Downloading Exhibitions II – Designing for Small Museums

Project Management

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Whether your exhibition budget is \$1,000 or \$100,000 establishing clear goals, budgets and deadlines up-front is essential to successful exhibition planning and design. The variety and breadth of things that need to be done to achieve the end result can be daunting. Many exhibition projects have come off the rails half way through due to failure to resolve the key messages, selection of objects or poor design briefs. The end result can be a disappointing shell of a once wonderful idea.

Breaking the project down into manageable stages can alleviate some of the stress and provide checks and balances against your original goals. It allows you and your team the opportunity to review and assess the project at key moments; provides feedback to curators and designers; and ensures agreement through each stage. Staging can also assist in maintaining control over your budgets and production costs. Too often do you hear of exhibition budgets becoming overblown at the last minute, because no-one had confirmed that all of the elements could be produced within the budgets and timeframes available. With careful staging, you should never find yourself in this position.

When setting out your ideal timeline for the project, be realistic. If your exhibition planning needs to be approved by a steering committee who only meet bi-monthly, or you are using an external curator/designer then allow adequate time for planning the project. Discuss what shortfalls may limit the project – tight budgets, types of loans required, availability of project team members etc. Consider construction time of display modules and production of graphics, and confirm delivery schedules based on previous experience or a conversation with suppliers. Then draft up an initial timeline with beginning and end dates. Next slot in the stages.

I use three key stages – Concept Development, Content and Design Documentation, and Implementation. If you like you can break these down in to phases within the stages, to help in analysing the resources you will need.

Stage 1

This stage is primarily the concept development period for the project and the principal research is carried out. To initialise the project it is important to hold a scoping meeting to discuss the aims of the project, the available timeline and budget. Is it to be a permanent display, temporary, touring? What is the anticipated audience? What public programs could be run alongside the exhibition? How large is the space? Will you need external assistance? How does it relate to your existing programs?

During the scoping meeting the project team can agree how often it will meet, and what deadlines it wishes to set. This is also the time to allocate responsibilities within the team. In this way, you can never get in to the situation of assuming that ‘somebody else’ was responsible. With clear responsibilities you can also avoid the problem of each individual member of the team wanting to have their say about every aspect of the project. Staging provides specific dates when progress can be reported to the overall team, and feedback given as a joint, agreed direction. Unless feedback is given in this structured way, it can be very difficult and unhelpful for the team member responsible to be expected to take on each individuals opinion.

Following the scoping the team member(s) responsible for development of the theme outline and major concepts will commence background research, and identify possible content. Other team members may be responsible for assembling all of the technical specifications of the venue, relevant floorplans, dimensions, power outlets etc. A draft costing for Stages 2 and 3 can also be done at this time, based upon initial concept development and presentation ideas. If resources allow the team can develop a positioning strategy for the exhibition, or perform a market analysis early on in the planning stages to ensure that they are on the right track. There may also be Educational strategies to be developed.

The steering committee/project team must have agreed upon the major concepts and themes, and have an initial list of objects (or types of objects) to be included before it can begin to develop a design brief. It is not reasonable to expect that a designer can achieve a quality result without a carefully constructed, and clearly defined design brief. Even if the designer is someone already on the team, don't assume that they understand the full message of the exhibition as conceived. The development of the design brief enables the team to distil their ideas into one document, and to establish what type of designer they are looking for – one who is strong in structural design, or whether only graphic design is needed etc. Remember, this document will be the reference for your designer, and they will go back and check regularly what it is you have asked of them. You will have opportunity - within reason - to expand upon the instructions, as the project takes shape, but this

document becomes the core. Finally, create a shortlist of designers to approach with your tender, establish an interview period and appoint the successful candidate.

At the end of Stage 1 it may be that the project will require further funding in order to proceed. Now that the team has created a project outline and design brief, these documents may be used to approach potential sponsors, or prepare grant proposals. The team should also look at the scheduling for Stages 2 and 3 at this point to see if any adjustment needs to take place to planned opening dates.

Stage 2

Having established all of the major themes and curatorial thrust of your exhibition during Stage 1, these themes need to be tightened and the final text and captions developed. Meanwhile the team member(s) responsible for curatorial work should finalise the selection of all object and images to be used in the exhibition. This process must be complete within the first half of Stage 2 in order to allow the designer(s) ample time to incorporate all this detail into their design. Whilst this process is being completed, the designer could be creating some schematic drawings etc. to work through larger concepts with the project team, which will then be refined along with the final text and object selection.

Following delivery of final text and the object list, the designer will require two to three weeks to come up with a draft design plan. They should also create draft specifications and gather cost estimates. If there is a separate graphic designer, this is also the point at which the graphic concept should be presented. The graphic concept is very important, as it serves to visually bind the exhibition. This meeting halfway through Stage 2 is crucial in

tying down the physical response visitors will have to the show. Following feedback from the Steering Committee the designer(s) can revise specifications, produce working diagrams and prepare formal specification documentation for a true costing and/or tender process.

Whilst awaiting tenders and quotes, other exhibition documentation should be occurring such as loan agreements, and sorting out all copyright issues for images and audio being used in the exhibition. Any freight and crating issues can also be arranged during this phase.

Stage 3

This is the stage where your dreams are realised and all the planning pays off. The tenders for fabrication and construction are awarded, graphic production is underway, and the space is being prepared. The implementation process is perhaps the most challenging of all the stages, and ideally by this stage there should be no surprises. If you are having exhibition furniture constructed, it is often a good idea for the Designer to visit the workshops on at least two occasions to observe the work in progress, to make sure that the manufacturer has understood the working diagrams. Have the Graphic Designer visit the production studio, or have sample graphic output sent to them to confirm that this is the finish and quality specified. Simple misunderstandings can create many problems when it comes time to install.

The big day has come - your exhibition is turning up from the various suppliers, your objects are on site, and now you need to install the exhibition. Once again, if it is a complex structural exhibition with multiple cases or uses an unfamiliar hanging system, it is useful to have the Designer present for at least a part of the installation. ■