Bringing the Public into Your Sandbox

Without Getting Sand in Your Face - or Theirs.

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EcoTarium
Worcester, MA

EcoTarium
museum of science and nature

Worcester, MA
2500 square feet permanent exhibit (our largest in decades)

Mostly hands-on interactives

The City as a Jumping off Point for Science

27 exhibit components; 10 university partners; 50+ community partners
Why invite people in?
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To answer questions we couldn’t answer any other way.
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What questions did we want answered?
Why invite people in?
To answer questions we couldn’t answer any other way.

What questions did we want answered?

• What do people want to see in the exhibit? (stakeholders)
• What is the science content behind the exhibit themes? (content experts)
Focus groups of stakeholders

What answers did we want?

• What themes and experiences did people **expect** to see in an exhibit about cities?

• What did they **want** to see and do in the exhibit?
What could possibly go wrong?
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“Trains! Put in a train!”
What could possibly go wrong?

“Trains! Put in a train!”

“It’s about how traffic lights work, of course!”

“You can’t have sewers and rats.”
What could possibly go wrong?

“You can’t have sewers and rats.”

“It’s about how traffic lights work, of course!”

“Trains! Put in a train!”

“Worcester is depressing!”
“Did I mention trains?"

Trains! Put in a train!

Worcester is dep.

You can’t have rats.

It’s about how traffic!

Of course!
In the end, we got:
A 60-foot Worcester cityscape
Live rats
Sewers
Before Brainstorming,
get people in the right mindset.

LLHW # 2
(that’s “Lesson Learned the Hard Way”)
LLHW # 1
LLHW # 1

Get the right minds!
Past Mistakes

1. Staff, Trustees, and Volunteers were not representative of our visitors.
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2. Once you were at a meeting for any reason, you were on the committee. (past project)
Divide who gets a say on what.
(example: staff team)

Animal Species Team:
- Wildlife
- Education

Animal Husbandry Design:
- Wildlife
- Veterinarian

Interpretative interactives & signs:
- Exhibits
- Education
- Wildlife

Visitor Amenities & Spaces
- Guest Services
- Education
- Facilities
Past Mistakes

1. Staff, Trustees, and Volunteers were not representative of our visitors.

2. Once you were at a meeting for any reason, you were on the committee. (past project)

3. People don’t understand the exhibit development process.
Get people in the right mind set:
help people understand the entire process
Get people in the right mind set:
warm up activity
Get people in the right mind set:
warm up activity

What’s one thing you want to change about Worcester?

What does the city SOUND like?

What makes Worcester Worcester?

What does Worcester SMELL like?
Once they are warmed up,

make a home for every idea, no matter how broad or specific.
What we didn’t anticipate
(the good stuff)

The *warm up questions* yielded important data:

• Rich, civic conversations
• Expectation that we would “tell the City”
• That people don’t agree on the definition of “city”
What we didn’t anticipate (part 2)

• That Worcester’s inferiority complex cast a long shadow.

• That people would find the topic of Cities compelling, but still worry that “they” (those mythical visitors) would not.
Content Experts!

Health Lab

Changing Landscapes

Mapping it Out

City Systems

City Animals

Engineering Lab

Neighborhoods
Content Expert
Quotation Hall of Fame

“You have to include X, and don’t leave out Y (oh - and remember A, B, and C.)”
What does the public think about fungi?

Show them front-end evaluation!

“Evidently there is work to be done.”
“I’ll assign my class to make exhibits for you.”
Content Expert
Quotation Hall of Fame

“I’ll assign my class to make exhibits for you.”

“The syllabus is already published.”
Re-establish *visitor* learning as the goal.
Content Expert
Quotation Hall of Fame
(our favorite!)

“Wait, wait! You guys are like a real profession!”
As I said, people don’t understand the exhibit development process.

They really, really don’t understand the exhibit development process.

(And they don’t know that they don’t know.)
So if we’re going to invite them into the process,
It’s unfair not to explain that process.

Bonus: They might end up realizing that we have real jobs!
Playing Fair with Collaborators

People need to understand the sandbox they are playing in.

They need the rules, the tools, the goals, and their role.
Tricks and Tools to Try

(Rules and Tools)

Explain how you do your work:

• Exhibit Development Diagram
• Written Description of Exhibit Development
• Photos of prototypes in different stages (including final)
• Evaluation tools, survey questions, etc.

Show your work to date with guiding documents specific to the project:

• Bibliography
• Design philosophy, interpretive goals, or exhibit mission statement
• Visitor experience description
• Front-end surveys
Tricks and Tools to Try

(Roles and Goals)

Explain to people what their role is (and isn’t):

• Role Document (job description) explaining:
  • Why their expertise is needed, how they are helping
  • Where it is needed, and when
  • Time commitment
  • When they will see and hear results

Discussion what the museum is and does:

• Vocabulary and definitions ("summer" is May-June to a professor)
• Features of informal learning environments
• Who is our “client”?
• Not all great ideas make great exhibits
THANK YOU!

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