

Producing Great Exhibits on a (Not So Great) Budget

By Paul Orselli

As the editor of ASTC's *Cheapbooks* (several volumes of inexpensive exhibit ideas), let me start by getting the word "cheap" out of the way right at the beginning of this article. You can make inexpensive exhibits that are well considered and well constructed without being shoddy in any way. And with museum workers feeling like they need to maximize resources even more these days, I'm going to suggest three broad areas to consider when stretching your exhibition budgets, no matter what the size of your institution: internal capacity, community partners, and online resources.

INTERNAL CAPACITY: IT'S WHAT'S INSIDE THAT COUNTS

There's a reason people say, "If you want something done well, do it yourself." This also applies to creating exhibit components in a frugal way. How can you leverage or creatively utilize existing tools, materials, workspaces, or staff to help produce

exhibit components? Even if you don't have a fully functioning (or fully staffed) exhibits department, are there parts of the exhibition development or production process that you can handle in-house to reduce costs?

Here are two easy examples. First, clean out your storage areas. Museums are great savers of stuff, but



Testing rough prototypes with visitors can save money in the long run. Photo by Paul Orselli



Students from a community center in Miami work on exhibit ideas. Photo by Sean Duran.

often staff isn't fully aware of all the materials that are lurking behind the scenes. Something dusty and unused in a back room just might become a useful piece of your next exhibition.

Second, is there a small space you can dedicate to prototyping and testing exhibit ideas? Carving out even part of an underutilized office or workroom for this purpose will give you the physical (and mental!) space to try out simple new exhibit ideas in-house first. Even if you pass these "tested" ideas to outside fabricators or designers later, you can save time and money by testing exhibit ideas internally first. (See www.astc.org/blog/2012/01/23/internal-capacity-making-a-good-museum-great for more thoughts on internal capacity.)

COMMUNITY PARTNERS: IT TAKES A VILLAGE

Another great way to stretch your exhibit resources is to look for and maximize strategic alliances with the communities surrounding your museum. Are you near a university, community college, or high school with strong vocational or technical programs? These educational institutions can make excellent exhibit development collaborators. Invite students and instructors into your process as true creative partners. They will bring their own skills and resources, such as fabrication or computer-aided design skills or access to specialty tools. You may find yourself integrated into the curricula of these institutions year after year.



A workshop provides a space for developing exhibit ideas. Photo by Paul Orselli

Similarly, are there local groups of makers, crafters, or hobbyist woodworkers or metalworkers in your community, or maybe already on your membership lists? Providing an occasional meeting space for such groups at your museum can be a perfect way to find out about the possible overlap(s) between your museum's exhibits needs and local community expertise.

ONLINE RESOURCES: SPINNING AN EXHIBIT WEB

Without a doubt, the internet can provide even the most cash-strapped exhibit developer at the smallest, most remote museum access to amazing resources. Learning how to grab onto those resources and put your own twist on them is a great way to create good stuff cheap. Here are some of my favorite online exhibit development resources:

- **The Great Big Exhibit Resource List:** This is a constantly updated compendium of resources for museum design and exhibit fabrication (including websites and contact information), hosted on the Paul Orselli Workshop (POW!) website. Whether you're looking for places to purchase

specialty hardware or options for suppliers of fake food, the Great Big Exhibit Resource List can help you out. (See www.orselli.net/sources.htm.)

- **Inventables:** This website is a great source for buying small quantities of new and unusual materials. Want to try some magnetic paper, conductive plastic, or weird color-changing materials for an exhibit project? Then the Inventables site is worth checking out. They've recently expanded their offerings to include bench-top machines and tools for fabrication. (See www.inventables.com.)
- **POP Design:** You know all those shiny, spinning, moving displays near the checkout counter at your local supermarket or convenience store? Those are called POP (for Point Of Purchase) displays, and all those wonderful battery-operated spinners, light-emitting diode (LED) blinkers, or cool customizable materials are a boon for exhibit makers. Why? Because after thousands (or millions!) of POP displays get created, the costs of these materials become relatively cheap, and the manufacturers are often willing to provide free samples, as well. (See www.popdesign.com.)

So whether you build up and use your museum's internal resources, or leverage community or online resources, the best way to get better at making great exhibits on a shoestring budget is to just make more of them. Have fun! ■

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