



## Good Things Come in Small Packages

by Paul Orselli

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**“At the end of the day, does the donation truly fit your mission and approach, or is it merely a refugee from someone’s attic?”**

**F**ew museums ever have all the resources they wish for. But when pulling together exhibits, small museums often find themselves in a particularly tight spot. The money, material and personnel available are rarely sufficient to meet their dreams. Thus, small museums need to maximize their resources and come up with creative solutions to exhibit challenges. I’ve gathered together a few rules of thumb that I continue to find useful as I develop exhibit ideas. Think of them as a Small Museum Survival Kit, although most, if not all, of what follows should be useful to the “big guys” too!

### **Money makes the (exhibit) world go round**

Naturally, you need money to create exhibits. But, having a tight exhibits budget often forces more creative solutions to challenges that arise. Here are a few things to consider:

### **Do look a gift horse in the mouth!**

Be very careful when accepting donations of exhibits materials from well-intentioned people. Your own institution should have a formal collections and acquisition policy, as well as a form that can be filled out with pertinent details on donated objects. Outdated technology, including computers and the like, can become a real nightmare to maintain.

At the end of the day, does the donation truly fit your mission and approach, or is it merely a refugee from someone’s attic? By the same token, be very careful when sponsors offer to build exhibits for you. Just because a board member’s company employs a phalanx of engineers doesn’t mean they know how to make things that will hold up to the enthusiasm of museum visitors! If a sponsor builds an exhibit, you should work closely with them to have the final say on both content and fabrication issues.

### **Volunteers, colleges, and community groups**

An often-overlooked resource are retirees and volunteers with special skills and talents. These folks can often complement your exhibits staff in important ways. Retired trades-people often are willing to complete projects or exhibit tasks for your institution. Local colleges or universities are often willing to work with a museum to create “real life” experiences for their students to complete as a class project. Engineering, education, and art students are all good candidates for this approach. Are there community groups, such as Rotary or Kiwanis, who might partner with your museum on an exhibit project?

### **Develop resource bases**

It’s important to become familiar with exhibit resources (human, printed, and electronic) so that when you get “stuck” trying to solve an exhibit development problem, you will have several avenues to follow. Two types of printed resources are books and catalogs. It is worth spending the money to create a bookshelf full of resource materials for yourself. Both ASTC and AAM sell many excellent publications. Some of my favorites are *The Cookbooks* and *Snackbooks* published by the Exploratorium, as well as the *Cheapbooks* published by ASTC (and edited by me!).

If I could only pick one catalog to recommend to a fellow exhibit developer it would be McMaster-Carr. Inside you can purchase anything from a single washer to a wheel for a railroad boxcar. (Let me know if you build an exhibit with one of those!) McMaster also has a website at <http://www.mcmaster-carr.com>.



The World Wide Web provides many resources for exhibit developers. You can find materials as well as search for local suppliers and fabricators. (Don't overlook eBay as a source for unusual items!) There are several museum-related internet newsgroups that allow registered participants to post questions, as well as just follow the conversations of others. Examples of such newsgroups include: Museum-L, CHILDMUS, ASTC-ISEN, webhead and LSC (Liberty Science Center, [listserv.lsc.org](mailto:listserv.lsc.org)). Internet newsgroups provide an instant set of colleagues even for those people who are new to the field or are unable to attend conferences. I've assembled a resource list of my favorites suppliers, organized by category at <http://www.orselli.net/sources.htm>. Feel free to e-mail me suggestions or additions to the list.

## People at an Exhibition

Even though I'm writing about exhibits, often the most important thing inside your museum is not the exhibit "stuff," but how people (staff and visitors) interact with the "stuff." A museum visit starts before the front door. Was the museum easy to find, with good directional signs? Do your website and answering machine convey the information visitors need in a simple and professional manner? If a visitor becomes frustrated before they even get inside your museum, it doesn't matter how great the exhibits are—your museum is starting off at a disadvantage.

### Little details add up

Clean, attractive, well-maintained exhibits send a message of "we care, you should too!" The same goes for the entire museum environment. Grimy walls, ill-maintained bathrooms, worn out exhibits with missing pieces—what messages do these things send to visitors? I have spoken with several colleagues who have corroborated that when their institution made a concerted effort to improve overall building maintenance, instances of exhibit vandalism decreased as well.

### How happy and engaged are your staff?

EVERY staff member (not just exhibits people) should WANT to know what sorts of things happen inside the museum. Ideally, they should want to use the exhibits, too. There is nothing worse than asking a person at the admissions desk a question, and realizing they've never set foot inside! Make it a point to include all staff and volunteers on "mini tours" of new exhibits and some training on the permanent exhibits. Encourage mechanisms for recognizing and responding to suggestions about exhibits by visitors and staff. A worthwhile use of wall space is to create a bulletin board where visitors may post suggestions or questions, followed by answers from the exhibit staff.

### Make it a marathon, not a sprint

After the band stops playing and the ribbon is cut on opening day, then what? What will your new exhibit (or new museum) look like five months from now? Five years from now? As Don Verger, the founder of The Discovery Museums in Acton, Massachusetts, remarked to me after the opening of a new museum building, "Well, now we're open forever!" Make decisions about your exhibits program as though you'll be open for a long, long time. Choosing broad "themes" for exhibition areas will allow you to add, subtract, or "curate" exhibit components over time without having to change introductory signage or graphics on a constant basis.

As noted elsewhere in this article, it is worthwhile to spend the time and money to use long lasting (or easily repairable) finishes! Clear-coated wood wears much better over time than painted wood or cheap laminates. Labels, on the other hand, should be easily changeable. (Sometimes the easiest way to "fix" an interactive exhibit is to change the label!) Nicely printed computer labels mounted behind plex or in frames are attractive and easily updatable. I've seen plenty of exhibits that were meant to be "temporary" still being used and enjoyed by museum visitors years later.

**"Grimy walls, ill-maintained bathrooms, worn out exhibits with missing pieces — what messages do these things send to visitors?"**



## Try, Try Again

Creating exhibits really is an iterative process. Every good exhibit developer has to have a little bit of a masochistic streak. Every day, visitors are going to be pounding away at components that you have probably spent months (if not longer) developing. Save yourself some heartaches and headaches by following the tips below:

### **You call that prototyping?**

Prototyping has become a word that means many different things to many different people. To me, prototyping should be a quick and dirty process. Scrap wood and duct tape all the way. Show people a working “proof of concept” to find out if they’re even interested in your idea. You need to make mistakes now in terms of label placements, table heights, reach distances, etc., rather than after you’ve built welded frames or created custom-sized laminate tabletops. If you have already spent too much time and money on an idea, you may be unwilling, or unable, to give it up.

### **Beware of the latest gizmo**

Be clear on what you want visitors to get from an exhibit component. If you don’t know where you’re trying to go, you won’t recognize the best exhibit tools and techniques to get you there. Too often the siren song of technology becomes louder than the voice of the exhibit content itself. Make sure the technology you chose to create an exhibit becomes an elegant solution, and not merely an answer in search of a problem.

### **Build it to last, because everything breaks eventually**

Choose materials and finishes carefully. If you don’t have enough money for laminates, for example, avoid the trap of painting surfaces that visitors will come into contact with. Even high-quality paint fades and gets worn after thousands and thousands of hands rub and pound away at your exhibits. You will be much better off with choosing a sturdy material like birch plywood carefully finished with a clear coating like Polyurethane if you’re on a tight budget. Then, even if

a chunk gets gouged out of your exhibit furniture, a little judicious sanding and a reapplication of clear coating makes it look almost as good as new. Also, don’t forget to add a four-inch or greater “kick plate” or recess around the bottom of exhibit furniture to prevent scuffs and dings from flying footwear.

Even if you build exhibit components that you consider “bomb proof” make sure you provide the people who may come after you with easy access to controls, parts lists and repair instructions (including a copy inside the exhibit component itself). I’m reminded of a frustrating telephone call I made to the designer of a traveling exhibit when I couldn’t figure out how to get inside a piece of exhibit furniture to replace a blown electrical component. “Well, you can’t get in. The box is completely sealed,” he said. “The component is rated for one million hours, so we never expected it to break down!” Needless to say, that exhibit was never repaired at our museum, or any other museum for the rest of the exhibit’s run.

### **What does ELVIS have to do with prototyping exhibits?**

At the 2000 ASTC Annual Conference in Cleveland, I was fortunate enough to speak on a panel about Exhibit Prototyping chaired by Patrick Tevlin of the Ontario Science Centre. Part of my talk dealt with how to use the word ELVIS as a mnemonic (memory aid) for exhibit developers when they are developing prototypes and exhibit components. The meaning of each of the letters in ELVIS follows below:

**E** = Everyday Materials. Use everyday materials to make it easier to prototype and maintain exhibits.

**L** = Looseness. Provide open-ended opportunities, both to yourself during exhibit development, and to the visitors in the final product.

**V** = Vermicious. The word means “wormy.” Good exhibits and prototypes should “worm around” and be accessible on many different levels: old/young, art/science.

**I** = Interesting. Two things: 1) Great exhibits/prototypes always seem interesting, no matter how many times you’ve seen them. 2) If it’s not interesting to you, how can you expect your visitors to be interested?

**S** = Sharing. We should be sharing ideas with our visitors, and with each other as professionals.

**“Creating exhibits really is  
an iterative process.”**



## Be the Best You Can Be

Sometimes the exhibit staff from newer or smaller museums develop an “edifice complex” (Especially after seeing the larger and older host institutions at museum conferences.) I’ve heard colleagues complain that “we can’t compete with ‘the big museums’ or Disney World.” You don’t have to. There is room for a whole spectrum of museums, large and small. I would much rather visit a smaller museum that is well-maintained and filled with thoughtful and creative touches, than a giant museum of lifeless, cavernous galleries and many “OUT OF ORDER” signs. (How many gigantic museums have you left with a headache from the sheer noise factor?) Large institutions often overwhelm their visitors. Instead, as a small museum, look for ways to “whelm” your visitors by providing more authentic and intimate opportunities for discovery.

### **Grow slowly (if at all)**

Be careful as to how your museum grows. Because hands-on components require maintenance, I firmly believe that there is an inherent “carrying capacity” or maximum effective size to an interactive museum. There **is** such a thing as a museum that has grown too large. Larger institutions are often forced into putting five-dollar ideas into five-thousand-dollar boxes simply because inadequate staffing forces them to fill space with things (they hope!) will never break. If you don’t have

enough floor staff and exhibits maintenance staff to manage your interactive exhibits, you are creating a recipe for visitor and staff dissatisfaction.

### **Break tasks into “chunks”**

Starting a museum or an exhibit project can be both an exciting prospect, and a daunting one. Rather than looking at your project as an enormous, complex task, I have found it useful to break the project into smaller tasks, or “chunks.” By breaking your project into these smaller chunks, it’s often easier to see clearly which parts of the project need more attention, as well as making it simpler to delegate responsibility for specific aspects to others (assuming you are not a one-person department!)

### **Final Words**

A great exhibit is never really finished. After the blood, sweat and tears that went into creating an exhibit component, you might feel like you never want to see the darn thing again! Later, after you catch up on showers, meals and sleep again, watch the unexpected things that visitors do with “your” exhibit. It might take a while, but you will start to think of ways to make the exhibit even better. This iterative process of observation and improvement is an important part of exhibit development – enjoy it!

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