

An Integrative Process for Exhibit Design

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To most curators, integration means taxonomy, displaying like with like. But are the display items related? Do they share maintenance needs? Does the display appeal to several age groups and types of visitors? Is it energy efficient, does it improve air quality, and does it smell good? Can it accommodate special evening events, offer photo opportunities for visitors, and provide a backdrop for the local TV station's weather report? Will car dealers promote it and bring their families? Will restaurants feature it on their placemats? That's multilayered integration: a zoo exhibit that is a community resource.

Multilayered integration is, first of all, an attitude. It happens because the people in charge are joiners, not splitters, and because it is good business. Zoos and aquariums can no longer afford single-shot approaches. Money is too scarce and time too short. An integrative approach also leads to a richer experience for zoo visitors. Zoos and museums always present objects and information in context, whether intentionally or not. But the context often negates the experience, as when a beautiful tiger is shown in a rusty cage or a delicate mollusk shell is displayed in a crowded hallway. A highly memorable setting incorporating sight, sound, smell, touch, and mood strongly affects visitors' perception of the subject. There is a growing awareness of the value of supportive, integrative context, evidenced in the popularity of contextual displays and walk-through dioramas in museums and landscape immersion displays in zoos.

How is multilayered integration achieved? Here are some pointers:

- 1) During the planning process, bring all points of view to the table. Each participant must be well grounded in his or her area of expertise, but each should also be quick to recognize mutual benefits or new possibilities.

- 2) Give everyone a voice. Use a structured brainstorming approach with a strong facilitator so that no one person or group dominates. Create an atmosphere in which it is all right to suggest a crazy idea or a nontraditional point of view.
- 3) Involve one or more participants who are natural synthesizers and can create alternative visions from a stream of apparently random suggestions. These participants should also know something about all of the fields represented.
- 4) Begin by asking what message you want to communicate. Rather than consider whether to use flat graphics, dioramas, or computer interactives, ask what you would like visitors to remember or feel about their encounter with the exhibit a month or 10 years later. Will the experience be worth remembering? Will they come back for more? Then consider the best means of delivering the experience that supports the desired message. You may find success has more to do with clean, uncrowded restrooms than with interactive computers.
- 5) Create firsthand experiences for visitors. A hands-on approach makes believers and changes attitudes. When visitors have a supportive or at least an open attitude toward the display, they will pay attention to information.
- 6) Create delight. People visit zoos, aquariums, botanical gardens, and museums for recreation and inspiration. Few come for education. Delight can open minds. Inspiration can touch heartstrings. Then new possibilities open and information finds a place to perch.
- 7) Add layers of function and meaning. Can the context that led to heightened awareness of the primary exhibit communicate with different age and education levels? Can it complement an eating or resting experience? Can it encourage sales of appropriate merchandise, providing revenue to support institutional goals? Can it provide a memorable setting for an evening cocktail party or afternoon corporate picnic that showcases your work to a new audience? Can parts of the display or support items enrich local school curricula, tour sponsoring supermarkets, or nurture zoo programs in Third World nations?

We live in the Age of Ecology; we are, after all, "one house." Zoos and aquariums should use this extraordinary realization to reconsider their messages, recalculate their costs and benefits, and restructure their exhibit design processes. Integration at all levels will help them get more from their resources and provide more for their visitors and their communities.