Developing the Exhibition Concept

Guiding Principles

These are some of the guiding principles the Museum follows when developing exhibitions:

Content Development

- Showcase the Museum’s extensive collections—from artifacts to archival materials—by looking for ways to use stored objects in new or existing exhibitions.
- Share the broad scope of the history of flight, its multitude of stories, and its crucial role in shaping the modern world, along with current accomplishments in aviation, space flight, and space science.
- Place less emphasis on separating the histories of aviation and spaceflight and highlight their often prominent interconnections.
- Incorporate the most current scholarship of Museum staff into exhibitions to highlight that research.
- Include not only the technology, but also people stories
- When possible, strive to make personal connections with visitors, allow them to see themselves in our exhibitions
- All exhibitions should have a stated main message or big idea and a list of take-away messages.

Exhibit Development

- Experiment with creative ways of organizing content that move beyond traditional chronological or subject categorizations or object classifications.
- Approach exhibition development with visual components (images, graphics, films), spatial orientation (gallery layout, interactive placement), and verbal presentation elements (label text, audio) in combination and with visitor expectations as a primary consideration.
- Emphasize relationships between galleries and major artifacts elsewhere in the Museum and at the Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center where possible and appropriate.
- Make exhibit evaluation and experimentation integral to exhibit development.

Presentation and Design Development

- Provide experiences within each major exhibition to engage a wide range of ages, interest and knowledge levels, and learning styles and abilities. (physical and intellectual accessibility)
- Strive for a “Wow!” factor in every exhibition—a spectacular, memorable, unique, and/or innovative exhibition experience.
- Use electronic/interactive technologies to complement and reinforce exhibition themes and content.
- Use technology to convey messages, not for technology’s sake (technology should be transparent).
- Provide sections in each major exhibition that can be readily upgraded to enhance the timeliness or to refresh the exhibition.
• Design exhibitions with spaces that are easily adapted to a variety of complementary public programming uses.
• Use mobile, web, and educational programming to complement and broaden the impact of the exhibition.

Developing the Main Message

The overarching message—the “big idea”—that all our exhibitions in the National Air and Space Museum seek to convey is:

Aviation and spaceflight have changed your life.

Every exhibition should have a main message as well—a one sentence statement that connects the visitor to the content and explains the relevance of the topic to them. The main message serves to guide exhibit development and focus the choices of artifacts, stories, and experiences. Developing a main message should be one of the first tasks of the exhibition concept development team.

Exhibit developer Beverly Serrell, in her book Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach, describes the “big idea” (another term for main message) this way:

A big idea is a sentence—a statement—of what the exhibition is about. It is a statement of one sentence, with a subject, an action, and a consequence. It should not be vague or compound. It is one big idea, not four. It also implies what the exhibit is not about. A big idea is big because it has fundamental meaningfulness that is important to human nature. It is not trivial. It is the first thing the team, together, should write for an exhibition.

Consider the following examples drawn from this Museum and elsewhere:

Milestones of Flight—Aviation and spaceflight have transformed the world.
Time and Navigation—If you want to know where you are, you need a reliable clock.
Hawaii by Air—Air travel transformed Hawaii.
Sant Ocean Hall—The ocean is a global system essential to all life—including yours. (NMNH)
African Voices—From the dawn of civilization, Africans have created diverse cultures and distinctive philosophies that now permeate our world. (NMNH)
On Time—Why is the clock so important? (NMAH)
Lewis & Clark: The National Bicentennial Exhibition—When they encountered each other, Lewis and Clark and the Indians made discoveries about their respective worlds. (Missouri Historical Society)

These examples are more topical in description:

Explore the Universe shows how our understanding of the Universe has evolved as the tools we use to study the Universe have changed.
America by Air shows how the development of the airline industry and changes in aviation technology have shaped the airline passenger experience.
The *Mammal Hall* is about the diversity of mammals and the processes by which they originated and continue to adapt. (NMNH)

*The Price of Freedom* exhibition examines how wars have shaped the nation’s history and transformed American society. (NMAH)

**Themes**
A theme is a sub-story or thread of content that is carried throughout a section or an entire exhibition. Large exhibitions should have no more than three. For example, *America by Air* has three themes, introduced as questions in the introductory label, woven throughout the exhibition:

- How has the federal government shaped the airline industry?
- How have improvements in technology revolutionized air travel?
- How has the flying experience changed?

**Learning Goals**
Learning goals are “take-away” messages or changes in understanding, attitude, or behavior that we want visitors to leave with and that can be measured through evaluation as a measure of success. The National Museum of Natural History has created this list of “categories of outcomes” that they use to measure success:

- Awareness, knowledge, and understanding
- Skills: intellectual, practical, and professional
- Values, attitudes, and feelings
- Creativity, inspiration, enjoyment, engagement, and interest
- Activity and behavior

**Defining the Audience**
Each exhibition shall have a defined audience. While the Museum overall has the widest possible visitorship, virtually spanning every age and nationality, an exhibition cannot be everything to all people. People have a range of expectations and learning styles. Some exhibitions will appeal to people with particular expectations or learning styles and not others. Ideally, a major exhibition should strive to satisfy a wide range of people.

One way to approach defining the audience is to determine who the audience is *not*. An exhibit space for young children will have different requirements than a typical exhibit. An exhibition focusing on hands-on interactives may appeal mainly to children and teenagers, although people of other groups should be able to enjoy and learn from the exhibits. A technical subject may appeal mainly to adults with that particular interest, rather than a more general audience, but it should be accessible to those without subject matter knowledge and invite them to learn and discover.

**Workshops**
Developing the exhibition concept can be a challenging process, because everyone on the team has different perspectives and ideas about how the exhibition could be done. There are unlimited possibilities but no one perfect approach. To promote creative thinking, an exhibit team for a major exhibition should convene a series of facilitated design-thinking workshops to brainstorm
ways to present the content and artifacts. Relying on the guiding principles for exhibitions outlined by the Museum, the group should establish the main message, themes, and learning goals.

**Final Documents**

The exhibition concept development phase shall result in a set of documents that identify the exhibition’s main message, themes, and learning goals and include a 3-D model of the physical concept, a floor plan, and some early elevations. These documents will provide the basis for fundraising by the Advancement office. A PowerPoint presentation on the exhibition concept for use by Advancement should be developed if necessary.