Community is the Key—Building Diverse Audiences

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Introduction and Background

Glenbow's diverse nature (we are a museum, art gallery, library and archives) has long been one of its strengths. It's also something that we've never really exploited in a systematic way. In April 1993, the entire staff re-organized into seven large, multi-disciplinary teams we call work units. These teams each focus on certain functions of the museum. For instance, we have a Programme and Exhibit Development work unit, a Publications and Research work unit, a Collections Management work unit, etc. We've tried to break down the traditional discipline-based hierarchy—for instance, curators and programmers now work side by side in a work unit rather than in discrete departments. But, a complete description of Glenbow's new organization is a topic for a whole other paper. Suffice it to say that we are looking very closely at how we work together to strengthen Glenbow, and most important, to strengthen our links with the larger Calgary community.

We've taken the teamwork structure to the microcosm level as well, by creating small teams to work on individual projects. *Growing Up and Away* was one such project. The team, consisting of one curator, one programmer, one designer and a project team leader, was formed in early 1992 and given the task of putting together an exhibit that showcased the vast diversity of Glenbow's collection of artifacts related to childhood. (Over the course of the project, the team underwent a number of changes—growing, shrinking, etc.)

We were given a number of directives that we'll note throughout our presentation. The most important and most daunting at the outset was our

need to appeal to a family audience. So what do you do when you've got a topic as broad as growing up and an elusive and somewhat nebulous target audience that defies definitions, spans the generations, and includes a multitude of diverse interests, skill levels, and knowledge bases? We'll try to explain what we did. We think it worked—the impending summative evaluation will prove us out.

The exhibit team was directed to create this exhibit for a family audience. Glenbow is a traditional museum, and has not created, or even hosted, exhibits for this audience group previously. We found ourselves asking the question "What is a family?" We quickly realized this was a topic for another entire exhibit, and rather than try to describe the innumerable sorts of families, we decided to focus on a few of the main characteristics common to families of all sorts: families share with, support, and learn from each other. We built in opportunities for visitors to demonstrate and explore these characteristics. Recognizing that everyone is part of a family, we tried to be as inclusive as possible, taking into account the different age groups, knowledge bases, interests, and learning styles that exist within family groups. We also recognized that everyone either is or has been a child, and since the exhibit is about childhood, we aimed to appeal to the *kid* in our visitors, no matter what age they might be, or what sort of family they might belong to.

Additional directives from management included 1) deal with serious issues and do not whitewash sensitive topics, and 2) get a maximum number of artifacts from the collection out on display. Doing these things and appealing to a family audience required reaching some very delicate balances, and evaluation played a very key role in helping us create an exhibit that serves the needs of management *and* is engaging and meaningful for families.

We've come to understand evaluation as the process of getting to know our audience better. Applying that knowledge to exhibit work hinges on equal doses of common sense, creativity, and the ability to put oneself in the visitors' shoes. Interpreting evaluation results can be a very subjective process, but the more we see things from a visitor's point of view, the more this subjectivity works for us as exhibit developers.

We used several different ways to try to get to know our audience better, including:

- Front-end questionnaires
- Related programs at the museum
- Story boards
- Two advisory groups, one made up of adults, one of children

Our presentation will focus on these four methods, and how they impacted the exhibit.

Front-End Questionnaire

With this tool we wanted to find out:

- What people remember about their own childhood
- If people would be put off by certain sensitive issues
- What people know about what growing up in western Canada was like over the last 100 years

We devised a self-completing questionnaire which we administered to school classes, seniors citizens' groups, employees at various offices, and acquaintances. We received about 100 responses, most of which contained very detailed and heartfelt answers. Even before we tabulated the results, the quality of the responses told us that this subject was one on which people held strong views they felt compelled to express.

Visitor Literacy Levels

Since it was a self-completing questionnaire, we also got a sense of the range of literacy levels existing in our target audience. As expected, the range was very wide, and we tried to reflect that reality in the exhibit by employing a variety of techniques. Although there is a lot of text in the show, there is a good deal of variety in type size, presentation, and kinds of information available. Text includes quotes and open-ended questions to encourage visitors to read aloud to each other and talk about the themes and concepts presented in the exhibit. The introductory text panel for the exhibit is huge. It contains a variety of type sizes and graphics and includes icons for components of an interactive nature: hands-on, things to take home, sensitive issues, questions to ask, and brains-on.

What Does it Mean to be a Family?

Without asking a specific question about family values, the questionnaire told us that this is an issue of great concern. In response to the question "Describe what you think it was like to be a child in western Canada 100 years ago," one quarter of the questionnaires contained a response similar to this one:

"Closer family units that did things together (more than today)."

These statements implied that 1) family values are important to people and 2) there is a nostalgia for the close family unit of days gone by. These implications tied in nicely with our target audience of families, reinforcing our desire to engage visitors in exploring what it means to be a family. One of the goals of the exhibit became to foster intergenerational sharing.

We did this in a variety of ways. Hopscotch is one example of how we provided opportunities for intergenerational play. A hopscotch pattern was inlaid in the carpet, and bean bags were made for players to toss. Hopscotch has been around for a long time. It exists in many different cultures, there are many versions of it. It is a simple game—and if you can't remember the rules, you can make them up, or play just for fun. You can play by yourself or with others, for as long or as short as you want. Most adults played it when they were kids. Children still play it in school yards and on sidewalks today. Family members can recognize a common experience, and share it in a non-threatening way. And even though many of us have walked through that space hundreds of times, it's still hard to resist jumping on the numbered squares as we pass by. The game has an innate appeal that invites you to play, no matter what your age.

Another way in which visitors are prompted to share with each other is in the way the artifacts are displayed. Historical objects sit beside brand new objects, providing people of many different ages and levels of experience with familiar objects, inviting comparison. This is nowhere more evident than in our toy store, where there are things that many grown ups owned or wished for when they were kids. Seeing those things evokes a sense of nostalgia, and people can't resist sharing their stories of that favorite toy with others. It happens without prompting whenever I am in the gallery. As adults are reminiscing, children are finding things that they play with now. Our interactive toy boxes full of modern toys are a big attraction, too. Connections between old and new are being made. Seeing objects in a museum that you cherished, lost, or longed for as a child, or that you play with today as a child, can be a very empowering feeling. One of the comments in our comment book reads "fun to see a hockey game *exactly* like my older brother had."

To meet the directive of visible storage, we based the design of this area on the idea of a toy store warehouse to maximize the number of artifacts on display.

Tell Us What You Think

The gallery provides opportunities for people to share parts of themselves with other visitors. A series of eight memory books asks questions about you, your parents, and your children. Public response to this very simple yet effective interactive has been outstanding. Within three months of opening we had to

place a quick order for additional sheets—these, too, are quickly being filled. Besides fulfilling an important need in our visitors to express themselves, they are a valuable resource for the team—they tell us that our attempt to create opportunities for people to find meaning in the exhibit and to share their feelings, memories, reminiscences with other visitors is working.

In the memory books, we get responses from all ages. They were designed to allow our youngest visitor to draw, while older visitors have the option of drawing or writing.

So often at Glenbow, and we suspect at other institutions as well, people have trouble making connections between their own experiences and what they are seeing. The memory books seem to have really personalized the experience for many persons. We hope that responses we've received in the memory books reflect the importance our exhibit team placed on the visitor—this exhibit is for them, by them, and very much about them.

Special Memories of Special Places

We also learned from our front-end evaluation that many people had special memories of a particular place, frequently something in the great outdoors. People remembered walking their dog on a sunny spring day along the Rideau Canal in Ottawa, or playing in the park with friends, or summer holidays with family at the lake. Our response was to de-urbanize the exhibit by including an outdoor-scene diorama which, among other things, is the venue for storytelling. It was also important to include an outdoor element to reflect the connections Canada's First Nations people have with nature. The animals in the diorama were recommended by the Blackfoot member of our team—each has a story (or stories) passed on orally from generation to generation—and the background painting is taken from a photo of where he played as a child. On the railing surrounding the diorama are two written stories. One is his recollection of the importance nature played in his childhood entitled "The Outdoors Was My Home." The other is the story of the "Bunched Stars," what we call the Pleiades.

The outdoor area shows the rural experience of childhood. Respondents to our front-end questionnaire often recounted working/playing on a farm or ranch as a child. We are able to investigate the importance of play as a child's work in artifacts and photos accompanying the diorama. An audio component adds to the ambiance—visitors hear birds, wind, rustling leaves, and other outdoor noises.

What was life like a hundred years ago?

Perhaps the most important outcome of the questionnaire was that we discovered that people had very stereotypical images of what life was like a hundred years ago in Western Canada. These stereotypes were formed somewhat by the age of the respondent. Younger respondents (children, teenagers) thought that life must have been cold and boring without TV or Nintendo, while older respondents longed for the simplicity and family values of early days.

The Ten Characters

We decided to illustrate the lives of ten children born between 1895 and 1954, real people from whom we had collected artifacts and photos. In this way, visitors could reach their own conclusions about life over the last one hundred years based on fact rather than stereotypes. These characters act as "tour guides" for visitors. They are introduced at the beginning of the exhibit and re-appear throughout. Again, it was important that the accompanying text be accessible to many levels of literacy. Accordingly, we had the introductory stories which accompany a photo of each of the characters as children written by a local children's writer, in the first person, and in the voice of a 10-year old. On the cover of the tour brochure, visitors read short biographies about the tour guides as children. The brochure panels can be flipped opened to show the "tour guides" as adults, and a short explanation of the path their lives took.

Using the characters has put a real face on the exhibit. Nine of the ten are still living. In fact, we developed a live interpretation program around one of them, Evan Gushal, and he was even able to be part of the event. A summative evaluation of the program showed visitors were very moved by seeing the exhibit come to life by meeting one of its "components."

Tell it Like it Is

Through our questionnaire we also learned that most people didn't want us to shy away from sensitive issues, so we didn't hide the fact that one of our "tour guides" was sexually abused as a child, one is a lesbian, and one was physically beaten when he attended residential school.

We provide this information in a variety of ways, first-person narrative on audio tape, first-person written accounts in gallery notes, and art by children about their fears. We have two resource areas, one geared to children, one to teens and young adults. They contain pamphlets promoting services provided by local agencies, and both fiction and nonfiction books that deal with difficult topics such as illness, death, AIDS, child abduction, and conflicts with parents.

Story Boards

In the formative stage of evaluation we developed story boards, one board for each concept area. We made 20 boards altogether. Our two main reasons for doing them were:

1) to help the team solidify our ideas and reach a common visualization of each area, and
2) to give the public and museum visitors something visual and concrete to respond to during this stage of evaluation

In this way we tested the exhibit concepts, educational approaches, artifact selections, and design elements. We went to high schools first, because teens seemed to be the audience group we knew the least about. Their responses changed our thinking about our portrayal of the teenage years. Teens told us that doing an exhibit about teens would be like trying to do an exhibit about adults. They hated being lumped into one category. There is no typical teen, they told us. The team's thoughts about this area had centered around nostalgia for teen years past. These students made us aware that if we wanted to speak to teens today, we had to consider their views. We conducted three focus groups with different high school classes. As a result, the teen area is more issues based, it doesn't reflect a specific time period, and it contains objects donated by teens alongside historical objects from the collection. Instead of saying "teens are like this," we tried to say "teens are people too, remember?"

The teen area is designed like a shopping mall. This format allowed us to be eclectic and include objects from different time periods. It's a teen "hang-out," but not restricted to teens. Just about everybody has been to a mall.

In addition to taking the story boards out of the museum, we used them for in-house visitor interviews. We set up in the space where the exhibit would be, and asked people to tell us what stories the images told. The responses were generally on track with our themes. The adults confirmed that there would be a strong nostalgia element, yet they cautioned us about being clichéd, and presenting too neat a picture. This reinforced our directive that things should not be whitewashed, and our earlier findings that people want to see the sensitive issues dealt with.

Advisory Groups

Besides our somewhat informal contacts with the community, we also engaged in some formal consultation. We formed two advisory groups, one of adults and one of youths.

The Adult Advisory Group consisted of 10 members. It included the producer of the Calgary International Children's Festival, a high school teacher, a representative from the local drug and alcohol treatment society, a coordinator of a minority achievement program, and a few parents, among others. The role of the group was to act as an "idea" resource for the team, to provide avenues into the community at large, to help the team refine the exhibit themes and assist with programming ideas and implementation. Their input was important when it came time to collect relevant material for the two resource centers. Their contacts with various social agencies were invaluable. A number of their programming ideas have been implemented as well, such as the dress-up area with re-creations of the costumes on display in the same area. Children will be able to put on the costumes, experience what it is like to wear traditional garb or the clothes of another culture, and have their photos taken. They also were instrumental in getting the team to realize that personalizing the exhibit was important. The result was the characters and their first-person stories, and the memory books.

To get input from youth, we consulted the Mayor's Youth Advisory Council, a group of 30 young people aged 8-18, coordinated by the City of Calgary. The group consults with local businesses and agencies who are interested in the perspective of young people. We asked the group about our teen section.

This group suggested names for the stories in the mall, made lists of artifacts that should be included, and donated artifacts, many of which appear in the show. Because of them, a bar originally slated as part of the mall became a job center. They felt drinking age was not a significant issue for them, whereas employment was. We took their advice and made an interactive job center instead. This area addresses the difficulties young people have finding work, and invites people to describe what their ideal job would be and post it on the job board.

One teen-aged member of the Youth Advisory Council is so pleased with the exhibit he returns every few weeks, bringing a different friend each time.

Related Programs

The idea for the final area of the exhibit grew out of one of our related programs, the Poster Challenge. Our call for entries drew over 250 responses from those aged 3-15. This tremendous response told us that there was the right combination of local interest, talent, and rich subject matter to extend the program, and so the "Community Banner Project" took shape.

We wanted something to end the show that everyone could find meaning in, something that evoked the fleeting specialness of childhood, yet something that all ages could relate to, something that would reflect visitors' thoughts and memories back to them. We decided to invite the community to create art about what growing up means to them. We provided children's art classes, individuals, families, and organizations with patches of fabric and instructed them to decorate their patch in whatever way they saw fit, with their ideas of what growing up means. The result is a series of five huge banners containing 50 individual patches made by members of the community. It is beautiful to look at, reflects the diversity of the community, and each patch has a meaning that comes from the heart.

The centerpiece is based on one of the winners of the poster contest. The impact of the Banner Project is increased by its display location—it is the last major display visitors see before they leave the gallery.

Conclusions

Though our summative evaluation has not yet happened, we can draw a few conclusions based on the responses we have so far. For example, in our comment book, one family writes "Unique, eclectic, lots of memories. Learning experience for us all. We'll have interesting conversations around the dinner table." To have the experience of the museum visit linger with people after they leave the site is very gratifying. Comments like these tell us that there is room, even a need, for thoughtful, family-oriented museum exhibits. Interactives do not have to be high tech to get people's attention. People of all ages respond to timeless things, like play, as long as the theme is relevant to everyday life. What's relevant to people is what should be relevant to museums, not the other way around.

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