

Front-End Evaluation And Planning Changes For a Community Museum

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Introduction

The use of front-end evaluation to guide the development of plans for a community museum is described in this paper. The Fort Collins Museum is a fifty-year old cultural institution in Northern Colorado. The museum is located in the former Carnegie Library building which was built in 1904. The windows of the historic building had been boarded up during the conversion of this building from a library to a museum in 1976. At that time, the interior design reflected the trends of that time and was sorely in need of an update. Viewing all this in the 1990's, one had to take a deep breath and reflect on the phrase coined by the Wizard of Imagination, Walt Disney -- "If you can dream it, you can build it."

In 1995, the museum received a grant award for planning new permanent exhibits from the National Endowment for the Humanities. This highly competitive award of \$45,000 was the largest grant ever received in the 50 year existence of our small museum. The goals of the grant were three fold:

- 1) to design an exhibition;
- 2) to develop educational programs; and

- 3) to create a collection initiative for obtaining donated artifacts from community residents to fill many of the gaps identified in the museum's collection.

Background

Kevin Britz, a museum director, likens the planning process of an exhibit to playing jazz. One begins by "laying down the bass line and then beginning to improvise from there. Like any progressions in jazz, movement along any of the areas in the exhibition planning sections leads to new sets of connections, a nearly infinite universe of intersections and directions for creative action" (Ames, Franco & Frye, 1992, p. 162).

Using this analogy, the bass line for the Fort Collins Museum exhibit was the mission statement. The City of Fort Collins council ordinance states, "The purpose of the Fort Collins Museum will be to collect, preserve, conserve, research, display and interpret those objects that serve to illustrate the story of man and nature in the Fort Collins area (#30, 1975)." The museum staff altered this statement of man and nature to provide a more politically correct and 21st century interpretation. The thematic focus for exhibit plans and educational programs will address people and the environment. This updated mission statement will serve as a foundation for further development and funding.

The grant provided our small museum staff the luxury of exploring ways to implement recommendations from the Excellence and Equity report (American Association of Museums [AAM], 1992). AAM recommends "involving representatives of various communities and diverse cultural groups (p. 19)." The need for the museum to better serve the minorities residing in Fort Collins was evident by the lack of ethnic related exhibits. The demographics of the Fort Collins community reveals 93% Euro-American (predominantly Germans from Russia) and 5% Hispanic populations while the remaining 2% includes other races, primarily Asian.

A community based exhibit was the ultimate goal. In order to achieve it, one consultant offered: "the hope is to encourage people to be self-aware and thoughtful about their own lives, material habits, civic, culture, attitudes toward growth and change (1995)." The need to share ownership/authorship of the exhibit with residents in the community by involving them in the creation of the exhibit was recognized. Community

input and collaboration was wanted and needed. Staff members of the Fort Collins Museum were committed to developing stronger relationships with the community.

About the Evaluation

The front-end evaluation focus for this paper was on the roles and contributions of the two largest minority groups in Northern Colorado:

- 1) Germans from Russia; and
- 2) Hispanic populations.

There was an absence of current changing museum exhibits recognizing the contributions of these two populations. These two distinctive and unique groups were eager to share in the creation of a more inclusive community exhibit. Front-end evaluation was implemented to explore their contributions.

Method

The first step in the exhibit grant process included hosting a round table discussion with scholars representing various academic disciplines. The scholars had provided broad topics and subtopics for the Germans from Russia and Hispanic ethnic groups. To create museum exhibits that were truly representative of the Fort Collins community, Germans from Russia and Hispanic people were contacted and asked to collaborate with the museum on the exhibit themes, designs, and plans. Focus groups were conducted to assist the museum staff in sifting through this information and prioritizing topics. In addition, interviews that included a card sort task were used to test a mock-up of possible exhibit content.

Focus Groups

Pre-focus group meetings were held for the Germans from Russia and Hispanic ethnic groups to better understand the exhibit project, group dynamics and the type of questions to be asked during subsequent focus group sessions. Questions were developed and revised before each focus group meeting. Five subjects participated in the Germans from Russia

focus group and four participated in the Hispanic focus group. Both focus groups included two moderators. Each focus group meeting was videotaped for review and analysis.

Mock-Up Development

Based on the focus group results, the exhibit designer created ideas for the "Fort Collins 2000" mock-up exhibit. The mock-up exhibit was composed of three hinged panels. Each panel stood 7 feet 4 inches tall by 3 feet 6 inches wide. The first panel was composed of background information about "Fort Collins 2000," an overview of themes and the proposed exhibit themes. The other two panels were based on the results of the focus groups. The middle panel was on the Germans from Russia and the right panel focused on Hispanic themes. Each panel contained a main and secondary labels, sample photographs and exhibit sketches (Figure 1).

Interview Development

An interview was developed to test the mock-up exhibit. Participants were asked to read the three panels of the mock-up exhibit. After viewing the mock-up, they were asked questions regarding the panels. The interviewer wrote down the responses to the questions. Participants were also asked to do two card sorts each for the Germans from Russia and Hispanic groups.

The interview contained questions regarding the current Fort Collins Museum, visitation, general feedback questions on the proposed themes, etc. Questions regarding the Germans from Russia and the Hispanics were specific and each included two card sorts. The first question queried viewers for their overall reaction to each of the proposed ethnic group themes; what they found to be the most interesting, reactions to the subtitle, and if they wanted the labels for the exhibit in both languages (German/English and Spanish/English). This was followed by a card sort. The main topics or findings suggested by the focus group meetings were put on colored index cards. The Germans from Russia were placed on blue 4 x 6 index cards and the Hispanic topics were placed on salmon-colored 4 x 6 index cards. Visitors were asked to sort the cards in order of importance to them; the most important card on top, followed by the next important

to the least important on the bottom of the pile. Visitors then sorted the same deck of cards into categories - definitely include this topic in the exhibit or definitely do not include this topic in the exhibit.

A nonprobability convenience sample was collected at three locations: at the museum during Skookum Day, at the Holy Family Church Fiesta, and at Colorado State University. Skookum Day is a living history day held annually at the Fort Collins Museum. The Holy Family Church Fiesta is a church fund-raiser attracting a predominately Hispanic congregation which occurs every summer for one weekend. Data was collected at Colorado State University for the museum as part of a class project. Students at Colorado State University were given a condensed version of the survey. A total of 77 participants were interviewed: 21 from Skookum Day, 27 from Holy Family and 29 from Colorado State University. The gender breakdown of the sample was 41 males and 36 females. There were 6 participants under the age of 20, 38 participants in the 21 to 30 age category, 10 in the 31 to 40 age category, 14 in the 41 to 50 age category, and 9 participants who were 51 or older.

Results

Responses to interview questions regarding the current Fort Collins Museum were based on responses from Skookum Day and the Holy Family Church Fiesta (N=48), since the student sample visited the Fort Collins Museum as part of a class project. The largest subgroup coded the current Fort Collins Museum as positive (46.2%); however, some visitors expressed the opinion that the museum was too small (17.9%) and changes (7.7%) were needed (artifacts, interactives and additional interpretation needed). The general reaction towards the new permanent exhibit was positive (66.3% - "I think it would be nice," "I like it", "Great idea", etc.). Participants found the proposed themes interesting (72.7%). Responses to the remaining interview questions were completed by all 77 participants.

The first question for the German from Russia portion of the interview was -- "*What is your overall reaction to the Germans from Russia topic?*" The largest subgroup for the reactions to the Germans from Russia proposed topic were coded as positive (44.2%). Many participants were surprised and unaware of the contributions of the Germans from Russia (13.0%). Some expressed negative reactions to this topic (10.4%). Reasons for negativity ranged from "just wasn't

interested” or “wanted to make sure equal weight was given to all ethnic groups contributions to the development of Fort Collins”. For question two -- “*What did you find most interesting about the Germans from Russia topic?*” -- participants found that the most interesting information about the Germans from Russia was their farming/work life (22.8%), journey from Russia/how they came to Northern Colorado (22.8%), the history of Germans from Russia/existence here in Fort Collins (16.5%), followed by the hardships experienced (12.7%). Reactions to the proposed subtitle “Unser Leit” (our people) were positive (49.4%), 28.6% were neutral and 14.3% found the title to fit in and relate well to the subject matter. The majority wanted to see the labels for the future exhibit in German and English (84.4%).

Question one for the Hispanic portion of the interview was -- “*What is your overall reaction to the Hispanic topic?*” The largest subgroup for the reactions to the Hispanic proposed topic were coded as positive (49.4%). However, some expressed negative reactions to this topic (12.0%). For question two asked participants -- “*What did you find most interesting about the Hispanic topic?*” -- participants found that the most interesting information about the Hispanic topic was their journey north (17.7%), loss of culture/adapting to the United States culture (15.2%), farming (11.4%), followed by their cultural heritage/traditions (10.1%). Reactions to the proposed subtitle “La Gente” (The People) were positive (72.4%), 9.2% were neutral and 18.4% responded negatively. The majority wanted to see the labels for the future exhibit in Spanish and English (89.6%).

As described earlier, participants sorted cards into two categories for both the Germans from Russia and the Hispanic topics. One card sort asked participants to sort cards by preference for definitely including this topic in the exhibit or definitely not including this topic in the exhibit (Table 1). The second card sort asked participants to sort cards in order of importance to them for each ethnic group. For the Germans from Russia, how Germans from Russia came to Northern Colorado was the most important (40.3%). For the Hispanic topics, the origins journey north to Colorado was the most important. Both card sorts resulted with the same topics being rated as a priority to include in the exhibit.

Discussion

Museums are always challenged to interpret raw data and illustrate this information in a two or three-dimensional exhibit. The exhibit design and interpretive message must be appealing and relevant to the visitor. Front-end evaluation on the proposed interpretive themes proved helpful in guiding the staff to focus research efforts on prioritized topics. Through the front-end evaluation, we gained confidence that the museum's interpretive message would offer a variety of cultural and intellectual perspectives reflecting an appreciation for the diversity of our community. From a customer service viewpoint, evaluation kept the staff focused on how the exhibits and program would affect the population that our museum serves. Collaboration with the community and between staff members insured that we were using our collections, resources and programs effectively. The focus groups and the participants of the survey have further helped us in shaping the exhibit ideas to reflect the personal experiences of local people. If residents, upon entering the museum and viewing the exhibits, are able to see a part of themselves reflected in the exhibits and programs, then the Fort Collins Museum will have played a powerful, beneficial role in the community.

During the interviews, participants were invited to free-associate with suggested catalytic situations intended to mentally place them in their own hypothetical Fort Collins Museum Experience. It proved advantageous to conduct the interviews during Skookum Day, an annual event which attracts a high number of visitors. The amount of time required to complete each interview was estimated to be about 20 minutes. The card sort task proved to be a successful technique for prioritizing potential exhibit themes. Participants actively engaged in the task despite many competing distractions.

The process integrated the recommendations of the American Association of Museums, and illustrates how our small community museum accepted the challenge of incorporating the Excellence and Equity standards (AAM, 1992). In summary, these included: developing new audiences, offering a variety of perspectives, and collaborating with the community that our museum serves. These standards were met by using front-end evaluation.

References

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Figure 1
Mock-Up Exhibit

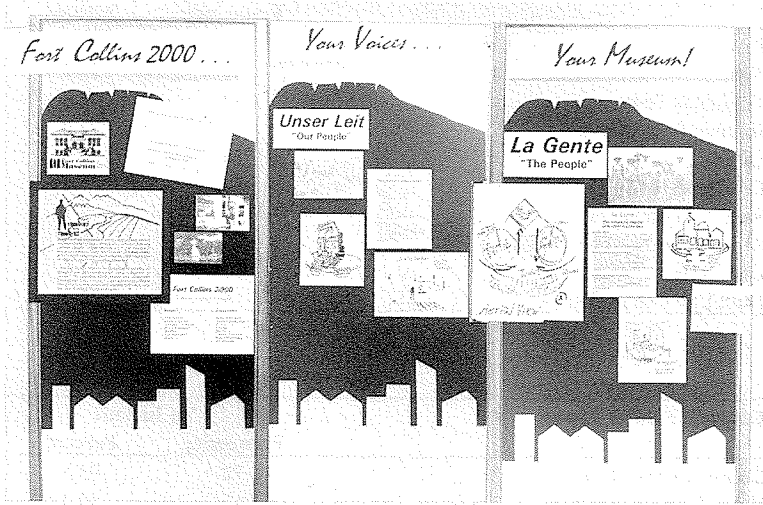


Table 1

**Interview Results from Card Sort Technique for Inclusion in the Exhibit:
Topics for Germans from Russia and Hispanic Ethnic Groups (N=77)**

Germans from Russia Exhibit Topics	To Include	
	Frequency	Percent
How G/R came to Northern Colorado	71	92.2
Values	61	79.2
Traditions Today	59	76.6
Journey from Russia	57	74.0
Discrimination	56	72.7
G/R Leaders	55	71.4
Sense of Community	54	70.1
Second Hoeing - controversial book	46	59.7
Life Cycle	40	51.9
Farm Life Description	18	23.4

Hispanic Exhibit Topics	To Include	
	Frequency	Percent
Origins Journey North	72	93.5
Unites Hispanic People	65	84.4
Migrant Worker	64	83.1
Discrimination	63	81.8
Influences of Education	62	80.5
Hispanic Leaders	57	74.0
WPA and Woodyard	54	70.1
Hispanic Lifestyles	51	66.2
Politics	40	51.9
Hispanic Business	40	51.9
Spanish Sayings	39	50.6