

Standards for Museum Exhibitions and Indicators of Excellence

Developed by the Professional Networks Council of the American Alliance of Museums

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Introduction

Exhibitions are the public face of museums. The effective presentation of collections and information in exhibitions is an activity unique to museums, and it is through their exhibitions that the vast majority of people know museums.

Museum exhibitions are complex, and even modest ones require the time, energy, and expertise of many people. Museums now realize that effective planning, management of resources, research and interpretation, collections care, marketing, merchandising, design and fabrication, public programs, publications, and fund raising all contribute to the fulfillment of a museum's mission. However, it is vital that we as a profession not lose sight of the importance of the exhibition in its own right.

The Characteristics of Excellence for US Museums

The standards and indicators in this document build on the AAM Characteristics of Excellence and help unpack them—particularly those in the Education and Interpretation section. The Characteristics represent the core standards for museums and are designed to be adaptable to museums of all types and sizes. They are used in the Alliance's Accreditation and Museum Assessment Programs, and other discipline-specific standards and assessments across the field; and underpin standards and best practices developed by the Alliance's Professional Networks.

The Standards for Museum Exhibitions and the Indicators of Excellence also inform the Annual Excellence in Exhibition Competition—a joint project of the following Alliance Professional Networks (PNs): Curators Committee (CurCom), the National Association for Museum Exhibition (NAME), the Committee on Audience Research and Evaluation (CARE), and the Education Committee (EdCom). The award recognizes outstanding achievement in the exhibition format from all types of museums, zoos, aquariums, botanical gardens, and any other types of noncommercial institutions offering exhibitions to the public.

Characteristics of Excellence Relevant to the Standards for Museum Exhibitions and Indicators of Excellence

Public Trust & Accountability

- 1.4 The museum strives to be inclusive and offers opportunities for diverse participation.
- 1.5 The museum asserts its public service role and places education at the center of that role.

- 1.6 The museum demonstrates a commitment to providing the public with physical and intellectual access to the museum and its resources.

Mission & Planning

- 2.5 The museum establishes measures of success and uses them to evaluate and adjust its activities.

Education & Interpretation

- 5.1 The museum clearly states its overall educational goals, philosophy, and messages, and demonstrates that its activities are in alignment with them.
- 5.2 The museum understands the characteristics and needs of its existing and potential audiences and uses this understanding to inform its interpretation.
- 5.3 The museum's interpretive content is based on appropriate research.
- 5.4 Museums conducting primary research do so according to scholarly standards.
- 5.5 The museum uses techniques, technologies, and methods appropriate to its educational goals, content, audiences, and resources.
- 5.6 The museum presents accurate and appropriate content for each of its audiences.
- 5.7 The museum demonstrates consistent high quality in its interpretive activities.
- 5.8 The museum assesses the effectiveness of its interpretive activities and uses those results to plan and improve its activities.

Standards for Museum Exhibitions

An exhibition is successful if it is physically, intellectually, and emotionally engaging and accessible to those who experience it. The following outline of standards and related best practices/performance indicators represent exhibition features that generally result in success. A competent exhibition need not demonstrate all of these features. Each museum and each exhibition is different. Therefore, the standards described below should not be taken as prescriptive. In fact, there is little that can be—or should be prescriptive about good exhibition design. We should always allow for purposeful—and often brilliant—deviation from the norm.

The following standards for museum exhibitions are organized in seven major categories followed by descriptions of what constitutes effectiveness for each category and a listing of specific ways the category might be expressed in an exhibition. There is overlap among the lists in the seven categories. This is purposeful as the seven categories are closely linked.

1. Audience awareness

The exhibition is developed with an articulated understanding of the intended audiences' prior knowledge, interests, learning styles, attitudes, or expectations about the topic and the experiences planned for visitors.

Some specific ways this standard is achieved and demonstrated are:

- The target audience is identified during the planning process.
- Decisions about content, means of expression, and design are based on knowledge about the intended audience.
- The exhibition incorporates community voice in the development process and includes a diversity of perspectives, if appropriate.

2. Evaluation

Evaluation studies are conducted during development and/or after opening the exhibition to understand its impact on audiences in relation to the project's goals.

Some specific ways this standard is achieved and demonstrated are:

- Front-end information is gathered to understand the intended audience including their prior interests in and/or knowledge about the exhibition topic.
- Potential audiences are involved in prototyping of exhibit elements, particularly with interactive components.
- Summative evaluation is conducted showing that the audience responded well to the completed exhibition including that audience learning and reactions are consistent with the exhibition's intended goals and impacts.
- Local museum practitioners are invited to participate in peer review of the exhibition using guidelines such as the Framework for Assessing Excellence.

3. Content

Content is thoroughly researched and vetted for accuracy, relevance to exhibition theme/s, and the current state of topic knowledge.

Some specific ways this standard is achieved and demonstrated are:

- The subject is appropriate to an exhibition format, with its use of collections, environments, phenomena, and other means of physical presentation of content.
- Authorship, biases, intent, and perspectives of the exhibition are revealed, identified, or attributed.
- The exhibits reveal who is talking, fact from fiction or opinion, the real from the not real.
- Content is expressed utilizing best methodologies for media choices.
- Media choices effectively communicate the content.
- Content is up to date.
- Content is jargon free.
- Best efforts are made to ensure relevance to the visitors.

4. Collections

The selection and presentation of objects furthers the intellectual content of the exhibition.

Some specific ways this standard is achieved and demonstrated are:

- The selection of the objects expresses the significant ideas of the exhibition.
- Collections are successfully utilized to reflect and amplify exhibition themes and content.
- The exhibition addresses the authenticity of the objects presented.
- The exhibition, as appropriate, identifies the material nature, form, and methods of production of the objects.
- Conservation and security matters have been appropriately addressed.
- Objects are mounted appropriately.

5. Interpretation/Communication

The information/message of the exhibition is clear and coherent. If not, there is a good reason why not.

Some specific ways this standard is achieved and demonstrated are:

- There is a clear idea or set of ideas expressed, and those ideas are made clear to viewers.
- There are coherent, easy-to-follow, and consistent formats for presenting content and eliciting responses.
- Assumptions and points-of-view are clearly identified.
- If appropriate to the subject matter, the exhibition need not provide definitive answers. Raising questions and providing a forum for ideas may suffice.
- A variety of interpretive strategies (including but not limited to: labels, interactives, video, audio, etc.) are considered and used when appropriate to the exhibition's goals, content, and intended audiences.
- Information and ideas in different parts of the exhibition are complementary and reinforce each other.
- The exhibition's content is engaging. Besides being stimulating intellectually, efforts are made to encourage social interaction among visitors, and there are abundant opportunities for establishing personal, meaningful connections.

6. Design and production

The selection, design, and production of interpretive media effectively and engagingly communicate content.

Some specific ways this standard is achieved and demonstrated are:

- Aesthetic choices support and reflect the theme and tone of the exhibition.
- Exhibit media are designed for comfort and accessibility.
- Orientation, spatial organization, and traffic flow are appropriate to the goals of the exhibition.
- There is imaginative and inventive use of interpretive media: labels, signage, furniture, casework, interactives, audio visual, new technologies, etc.
- Design motifs are well thought out and consistent throughout exhibition.
- Both design and production ensure that all exhibitry is reliable, maintainable, and sufficiently robust for the length of the exhibition period.
- Temporary and traveling exhibitions are designed and produced in a manner that meets the requirements necessary for frequent installation, dismantling, and travel.

7. Human comfort, safety, and accessibility

The exhibition is designed such that the experience of the visitor including their physical, intellectual, and social well-being is taken into account.

Some specific ways this standard is achieved and demonstrated are:

- The physical space (such as layout, lighting, flooring) is created in such a way that audience members of varying physical sizes and abilities are able to navigate and interact with the exhibition.
- The content is developed in such a way that audience members of varying ages, cultures, and cognitive abilities are able to understand and learn from the exhibition.

- The environment is designed in such a way that audience members of varying ages and cultures feel safe and comfortable interacting in the exhibition.
- If the exhibition includes any potentially troubling content or material, visitors are appropriately forewarned so they can make informed decisions about whether they want to see it.
- Labels are legible and easy to understand.
- Visitors are given spaces to sit within the exhibition.

Indicators of Excellence in Museum Exhibitions

While many exhibitions achieve a competent level of professionalism, each year there are a few exhibitions that achieve excellence by surpassing standards of practice in scholarship interpretation, content, integration of audience voice/evaluation, and/or design or by introducing innovations that stretch the boundaries of accepted practice. Such exhibitions are highly distinguished and serve as models of the capacity of museum exhibitions to provide transforming experiences visitors so often attribute to them.

Some specific indicators of exhibition excellence are:

- An aspect of the exhibition design is innovative.
- The exhibition offers a new perspective or new insight on a topic.
- The exhibition presents new information.
- The exhibition synthesizes and presents existing knowledge and/or collection materials in a surprising or provocative way.
- The exhibition includes audience voices in a new or innovative way reflected through exhibition design or content.
- The exhibition includes innovative uses of media, materials, and other design elements.
- The exhibition is particularly beautiful, exceptionally capable of engendering a personal, emotional response, and/or profoundly memorable in a constructive way.
- The exhibition evokes responses from viewers that are evidence of a transforming experience. Such experiences are often characterized in these ways:
 - It was haunting.
 - The exhibition was an absolute eye-opener.
 - I'll never see XXX in the same way again.
 - I was filled with excitement.
 - It knocked my socks off
 - It sent shivers down my spine.
 - I finally got it!