Better by Design: Graphics in Exhibitions

by Ann Neumann

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Graphics surround us, and it becomes easy to take their power for granted.

Whether simple or complex, communication design in the built environment incorporates the fundamentals of form, function, and meaning, in effect creating conversations between people, objects, and the environment. Exhibitions, through their graphics, tell stories, signal a mood, provide information, entertain and delight. They transmit messages to your brain and prompt conversations. A great deal of thinking and a range of considerations go into the decisions that produce good design. Graphics surround us, and it becomes easy to take their power for granted.

As a visitor, I want to walk into a gallery and understand something about where I am, what the exhibition is about, and how I can find out more. I want to move through the space gathering information and experiences as my mind and heart desire, and leave feeling inspired, challenged, informed, but above all emotionally connected.

Exhibitions are often a carefully choreographed display of objects, increasingly interactive and theatrical, with an intentional identity and brand. Their spaces need to be navigated and the content communicated with innovative techniques while addressing an audience of all ages, nationalities, and educational backgrounds.

Adding to the challenge, interpretation is often needed for complex concepts not easily reduced to a single image. Creating meaning is further complicated as visitors bring their own cultural biases and personal experiences to the mix. The increasing variety of available mediums and materials that are possible, and the growing need to understand whether a graphic interface is better suited to an analog or digital solution requires a subtle and responsive approach from the designers. They need to make sense of the growing amount of information available including visualizations, the communication of messages, future scenarios, and projections in a visual landscape that is often digital and networked.

Leading a team at a large science center, I find that designers, using visual communication and media, have a role in shaping and embracing a shift in a culture that is increasingly participatory. We engage in a practice that incorporates new processes and methodologies as modes and materials change. It helps to be both a thinker and maker. Concepts of community engagement, modular construction, and open source initiatives have allowed new tools and areas of practice, with blended boundaries of expertise. Navigating this evolving landscape is more than a skill set—it requires a mind-set.

Graphics are the platform that can communicate and guide a journey that is increasingly participatory and experiential. Understanding the approach, process, and tools can be helpful for everyone involved.

Process

In practice, the design of exhibition graphics is highly technical and specialized. In addition to solid conceptual thinking, a mastery of software, and a wide understanding of materials and output processes, designers must have

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core skills that include knowledge of, and training in the best practices in environmental design. For individual projects, designers must become mini-experts in the content in order to communicate and interpret effectively. Collaboration with the content developers, exhibit designers, and text writers requires a team effort for truly integrated results, where the verbal and visual inform and enhance each other.

Such a multidisciplinary and collaborative design process that frames problems, suggests possibilities, and digs deeply into levels of research and ideation can produce results that reach beyond the often tired, trite, or commonplace. A structured, traditional framework in which to organize visual content can coexist with solutions that include invention, idiosyncrasy, and customization.

Here are some things to consider when developing a graphics program for an exhibition.

Foremost is my recommendation to integrate the designer onto the team early:

1. Start with understanding the audience. Who are they? What is the cultural context? Begin with research and communication to define the audience, gaining insight into their attitudes and awareness, including the results of any formative evaluation. Be as precise as possible.

2. Identify the affective and design goals for the exhibition. Are there challenges? If so, what are they? Is the interpretation to be bilingual? Verbalize the desired visitor experience; document it in a design brief. The solution to a design challenge can often be found in the defining the problem.

3. Immerse yourself in design research. Build a visual exploration of the content, context, and inspiration relevant to the topic. Use a variety of sources—the more varied, authentic, and close to the source the better. Create content, mood, and inspiration boards. Surround the team with imagery and let them steep in the visuals. Invite comments.

4. Talk, sketch, and meet often with the exhibit designer and content developer. The 3D and 2D design should ideally be integrated, connecting the forms, colors, textures, and messages. These conversations and collaborations between team members continue throughout the process.

5. Start the design exploration, allowing enough time to explore an original visual vocabulary that can convey the content, mood, and spirit of the exhibition. These studies will include the development of color palettes, font use, design motifs, and image treatments. At this point in the process, the component parts of the graphics program are being assembled.

6. Analyze the exhibition design plan as to where and what formats will be needed to convey information. Decide what is analog or digital. Think of scale, placement, and

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content. Map the locations of these signs onto the exhibition floor plan. Graphic formats or sign types that are in most exhibitions include:

Title/Zone Overview Signs: large-scale titles and/or visual experiences identifying the topic of the exhibition or zones.

Environmental Graphics: large scale typographic or visual treatments whose main objective is to create an ambiance or conceptual setting. These graphics may contain 3D elements or convey information in a diagrammatic context.

Directional or Wayfinding Signage: exhibition specific signs within the gallery orienting the visitor to a specific experience, exhibition path, or exit. In the larger context of the museum these can include visitor amenities.

Donor/Credit Signs: often found at the entrances to major exhibitions. These can include donor and team contributors.

Content Interpretive Panels or Labels: may include visual images, interpretive text, and information about the content of the exhibit. Interpretive panels should be designed as an integral part of each exhibit experience, their form and placement should be expressive of the content of the exhibit and whenever possible, be tested and evaluated in visitor studies for both content presentation and visual effectiveness.

Instructional Signs: detailed, step-by-step labels that give the visitor clear and concise direction about a specific activity. These may be simple directives i.e. "push," or more complex instructions that include images to help visitors understand the sequence and activities required. Visual, diagrammatic instructions have the additional benefit of making the directions understandable to non-English speakers and the non-reading audience. Consider installing test instructions as temporary signage at first, to allow testing with audiences, making changes as needed. Final graphics can be installed post opening.

Artifact ID Labels: text signs that are exhibited in close proximity to the artifact on display. These informational labels can explain the artifact, its origin, ownership (if any) and importance to the exhibition.

Media Interactives: may include projections, immersive digital experiences or screen based interpretations. The design and production of these require developing navigational wireframes for each specific program, adaptation of the exhibition design vocabulary for the dynamic possibilities of these environments, and of course testing for all interactions. Depending on the complexity of the information and a desire to update text or images, a content management system may be considered (CMS). Include information or interface designers on the project as needed.

7. After understanding and deciding the many mediums that may be needed, the designer(s) can begin to create visualizations that convey the graphic concepts integrated with the form factor vocabulary of the exhibition. How do environmental graphics, graphic content panels, instructions and media relate to each other? What is the appropriate amount of information and visuals for each level of experience?

8. Design content panels and layouts to allow layered information, use sample text to test the length, tone and interplay of the visual and written interpretation. Be aware of the non-verbal communication of the graphics. Consider using pictograms to convey information visually and non-verbally, especially when communicating to very diverse and multinational audiences. Test the interpretation as often as possible.

9. Source images, finalize text, and produce final layouts.

10. Collaborate on, and art direct, the media interactions and displays for an integrated experience.

11. Have a solid review process, color test, proofread, and give credit to image sources. It's useful to hold back part of the budget to remediate the inevitable surprises post opening.

Installation:
Accessible signs should be installed at optimal heights, generally within 42-70 in., depending on the type and size of the signage. Consistent placement allows visitors to anticipate where to find information while carefully focused lighting assures visibility without glare.

Material Considerations:
Design for longevity: graphics should be designed to withstand typical use over the course of their intended life span. Sustainable materials and processes are increasingly available. Create test graphics and have samples printed on the materials you're considering. There's no good substitute for seeing and prototyping the durability, quality, and appropriateness of specific materials. Nurture your relationships with your suppliers and vendors; their expertise as collaborators will help produce a better quality result.

Standards
Understanding the diverse needs of people who visit museums includes examining factors that create a better experience for all visitors. Among others, they should include adapting for the needs of older visitors, people with low vision, and accessibility for those in wheelchairs. Excellent standards exist to guide the contributions of typeface, type size, spacing, and contrast to increase legibility. The use of these standards greatly increases a more universal and consistent design approach. Some of them are listed in the sidebar on this page. At our museum, the Liberty Science Center, we've adapted the best practices from these and other sources to develop a site-specific approach documented in a set of standards. Editorial guidelines define the approach, voice, and text length for interpretation. Graphic standards include specific recommendations for typography, contrast, and placements. Used together, they're a helpful tool for developers and designers to create a consistent visitor experience. And they can establish a powerful voice and identity for the exhibition or the museum.

Successful designs can cover a wide spectrum. They can be aesthetically pleasing, or not, depending on the purpose. Interpretive graphics can poke, provoke, stimulate, enlighten, or soothe. Matching the design solution to convey and advance the goals of the exhibition, perhaps in unexpected and revealing ways, is the challenge.

Design matters. An exhibition will be experienced within a larger cultural understanding and perceived as relevant or not by its community. Thoughtful and well-designed graphics are a powerful tool to channel the creativity, spirit, and message of the experience. Ultimately, it's individual visitors who will see, feel, and integrate what they perceive into their own highly personal and memorable narrative of the experience.

Recommended resources:
SEGD—the Society for Experiential Graphic Design segd.org

Smithsonian Guidelines for Accessible Exhibition Design

Standards Manual for Signs and Labels, AAM and the Metropolitan Museum of Art

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