



The Public Is a Team Member: Opening up the Cooking Exhibition's Development Process—in Progress!

by Wayne LaBar

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The exhibition development process has traditionally been a closed, top down approach. By “closed” I mean that a small team of exhibition professionals, advisors, and contractors are the significant players and primary contributors to the creation of an exhibition. By “top down” I mean that content and ideas are generated by these select few and then “distributed” to the masses through the media employed by the exhibition and related programming.

Involving the public in this process has normally occurred only through planned and scheduled processes. Surveys, questionnaires, focus groups, and marketing studies are some common ways the public is included during the idea phase of projects. These are often not dialogs; rather they are one way communications from the museum to the public. Front-end and formative evaluations are also ways in which the public has been involved, but these methods tend to be focused on learning outcomes, not participation in the creative process of exhibition design. Additionally, museums have worked with particular segments of the public (age group, culture, etc.) to create certain exhibitions. But in a world now filled with content creation by the public and with interest in a diverse level of content that creates what is known as the long tail, there is an opportunity to explore how to bring the public at large into the exhibition process—more as a team member than as a market or audience. A few years ago Liberty Science Center began an ongoing series of investigations—an attempt to engage the public in its exhibition process and operations—called the “Exhibit Commons.” While the experiment is in progress, this article lays out preliminary observations, lessons learned, and discoveries made during the first

year of one of our most complex projects to date —*Cooking: The Exhibition Chefs*.

Observation One: Some topics may lend themselves to public participation. On the other hand, all topics probably lend themselves to “expert” participation, and with the creation of public “experts,” perhaps any subject is game.

Beginning in 2008, Liberty Science Center decided to explore public participation in the development of *Cooking: The Exhibition Chefs*. Because of wide cultural interest in cooking and food, its connections to all human beings, and a large professional infrastructure on the subject, the staff felt that this exhibition offered an edge in exploring public involvement. The topic potentially provided enough “meat on the bones.” (Please pardon the food/cooking analogies, but they are hard to resist when talking about this project!)

Observation Two: Using public social network programming offers the flexibility that is needed by the team, can be mastered by anyone with little effort, and makes it easy for everyone to participate. That also means one must live with the limitation that most social media sites are not designed as management software. But more purposeful project management software may set too high a barrier for allowing the public to engage in the process.

In including the public we wanted to replicate as much as possible the typical LSC process for creating an exhibition. Therefore, we decided not to change this process (team meetings, research, etc.) but just add the public as outside team members. We began by involving others



Cooking website's home page.

by means of a social media website, and we continue to find this useful. We chose the Ning system since it offered some easy-to-use features that we could deploy immediately. The site is at <http://cookingexhibitchefs.ning.com/> and is known as **Cooking: The Exhibition Chefs** website. This was the launch point for all of the milestones to date and remains a key driver in changing and affecting what we do.

First, inviting anyone who wanted to participate on the team/in the project meant that we were attempting to make the exhibition process transparent through using this social site—one of the principal ways to keep our “invisible” team members involved. This is the underpinning of the site’s importance and lies at the heart of several significant observations.

A key advantage of the site is that it can be set up with no web programming or infrastructure requirements. It was literally created and online within one day. This flexibility has also allowed the team to respond quickly and on the fly to the needs the process encounters. In our efforts for transparency and to include the public, we have worked hard to make this the ONLY site where all comments, notes, research and ideas have been posted. On the project management side,

all drafts and working documents are posted and all meeting requests are made through the site. The problem we have encountered is that the social site is meant for socializing, not project management, and as a result, we are constantly looking for ways to improve its organization.

Observation Three: While project details are traditionally shared with team members and related experts, inviting the public changes knowledge borders. And not all members of the public are the same. Suddenly friends, family and museum colleagues join social networks in unexpected ways. How do you respond if your mother criticizes your work in front of your professional colleagues and friends?

When this process began, it was unclear who would be interested in participating in such an endeavor. While the idea of opening up the exhibition process is something the field has discussed and considered, “who will participate” is a fascinating question. Currently (as this goes to press) **Cooking: The Exhibition Chefs** has 228 members and is growing at a steady rate of one to two members per week, with little to no advertising. Looking back at

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the “long tail” concept—small numbers of people being interested every subject under the sun—team membership certainly reflects that idea. People join for different reasons, and opening it to everyone results in certain changes to the relationship between one’s work and one’s life. Categories of interest can be simplified into the following:

- Exhibition development and design (museum professionals)
- Renting the exhibition (museum professionals)
- Social media (museum and technology professionals)
- Cooking as pastime
- Cooking as profession
- LSC (members and visitors)
- Project members (family and friends)

While one might surmise that most members minimally engage in the project, a number of them participate actively. The excitement and energy that some of our members bring to the project, their willingness to participate, and their additional ideas and feedback have been invaluable to the exhibition. In fact, these have been so meaningful that some members have changed from being “the public” to becoming partners with potentially full-scale roles. For example one member who joined the site, interested in the subject because of her previous experience as a chef and her educational experience in food, has become the team’s lead developer for public programming. This is the result of all the energy and time she spent with the project via meetings announced on the web site. On a related note, not only do public members provide feedback; they have also taken on a more physical, real world presence in unexpected ways. From actually showing up at

the science center to participate in a meeting in person, to sending examples of food they have grown or cooked, this aspect has generated far more engagement for the full project team.

Observation Four: One must carefully consider expectations and what the concept of transparency may mean. While others may become aware of information that could be viewed as confidential or perhaps even advantageous to a separate project, these risks need to be weighed against the combined assets this process can create.

We all look to learn from one another in the museum field. Our profession has, in general, a long history of standing on the shoulders of those who have gone before. Meanwhile, ongoing subjects that will probably never disappear are questions around the ownership of ideas or design of exhibits and exhibitions. In addition, during exhibition development we often invoke confidentiality about ideas and proposals for competitive grant applications, designs that are in the conceptual stage, and other information. In order to engage all of our team members in the Cooking project, we have already posted early drafts of material concerning exhibit ideas, concepts and an NSF preliminary grant. Several members of the public reviewed the grant for this round and provided invaluable feedback.

Observation Five: As we move into the next design phase, our current mode of working with the public may have to change.

The exhibition is now moving rapidly through conceptual design. This next phase will be one where, as in a typical exhibition project, members of the team may begin to concentrate



Cooking team meeting; participants can “attend” by speaker phone and can send in written comments to documents posted on the website. Courtesy of Liberty Science Center.

on work in which they specialize and then move to present ideas together. While prior to this phase meetings occurred primarily at a weekly pace, the number of meetings among different team members will increase. Will our team members who are not on staff be able to keep up with this heightened pace? Will this change the roles they can play?

In conclusion, as we look to the future of the project, working with the public will constantly need to adapt and change—just as all exhibition team dynamics change due to the phase of work being completed. Questions we will need to answer are: whether public team members can play any specialty roles; how to merge involvement in smaller meetings; how to share concepts and drawings; and what tools can be used in meetings to allow everyone to participate equally. The “recipe” for our public participation will no doubt become more complex but also richer for the effort. Drop by our site for further “tastings” because our rule of thumb for **Cooking** is that “too many cooks NEVER spoil the broth.” ☀

How do you respond if your mother criticizes your work in front of your professional colleagues and friends?