

or conducting price checks can make the kids' experience so much better.

So listen to your staff, watch how they engage guests, and encourage and reward staff for the excellent job that they do. It's not just about the exhibits and the building; it's about how staff use these physical assets to make the experience unforgettable for kids and their families.

Personality with Purpose: Designing a Relationship with Visitors

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Kathy Gustafson-Hilton, senior developer at Hands On! Inc., uses facilitation skills honed through dozens of projects to help clients craft goals, ideas, and exhibit content. Together with Lyn Wood, president of Hands On!, Gustafson-Hilton works with museums to define meaningful relationships with visitors that create high quality learning experiences.

Museums often ask us to partner in helping them launch a new initiative, typically an exhibition. We start by exploring how the museum's mission and this new initiative coincide. How can we design a high-quality exhibition that best reflects the museum's highest aspiration?

A key part of the process is understanding the museum's "personality"—the vibe that exists between museum and visitor. This involves describing the personality the museum currently projects to its visitors, and then articulating the facets of the personality they want to project in the new exhibition. Through a collaborative method staff as well as stakeholders engage in a process that is vigorous, collegial, team-building, and revelatory; when we collectively hit upon the personality that will provide the team with clear guidance for the exhibition design work ahead, everyone immediately knows it—it feels right.

Since exhibitions are social experiences where people interact with each other, with objects, and with architecture, the design of the environment and the experience directly affects the quality of that interaction. The more we understand the personal relationship that the museum wishes to achieve with visitors in a particular exhibition, the more we can design an exhibition that supports it.

Articulating a personality means creating a face, a voice, a recognizable identity that embodies the museum's mission and the way

they want to relate that mission to visitors. This isn't an actual character that the museum will present to the public but, rather, a behind-the-scenes sensibility that underlies all aspects of the exhibition design.

One organization chose to model the personality of their new exhibition on environmentalist Rachel Carson—encouraging, amazed, inquisitive—because, like her, they wanted to inspire people to discover a sense of wonder and awe about the physical world. This personality concept led us to design exhibits and an environment that were, like Carson, elegantly eccentric, enigmatic and graceful. The exhibition helped visitors create unusual connections and used striking graphics that encouraged questions and inspired experimentation.

Another museum invented "Coach Buddy," an energetic, positive mentor who inspires visitors to have fun inventing ways to lead active and healthy lives. The qualities they assigned to this personality—creative, responsible, trustworthy, and fun—became key words that drove the development of the exhibition content, its design, the encouraging voice of its messaging, and the graphic design that communicated those messages to visitors.

Articulating an exhibition's personality provides something tangible from which to design exhibits and environments that express this personality in appealing, sophisticated, imaginative ways that attract kids and adults. When museums and exhibit designers convey a personality on purpose, they create an intangible specialness that visitors can feel. The space sings with the excitement of discovery and engagement that are the hallmarks of a high-quality experience.

High Quality = Internal Capacity

Paul Orselli
Paul Orselli Workshop

Paul Orselli is president and chief Instigator of POW! (Paul Orselli Workshop). Orselli has held director-level positions at the Discovery Museums in Acton, MA, the Ann Arbor Hands-On Museum (MI), and the Long Island Children's Museum (NY). He has consulted on museum projects including the New York Hall of Science, the Exploratorium, and the National Science Foundation. In addition, Paul has also been the editor and originator of the three best-selling *Exhibit Cheapbooks*, published by Association of Science-Technology Centers, and has served on the board of NAME (National Association for Museum Exhibition).

"High quality" to me means something of lasting value, something special that is meaningful over time and across generations. And children's museums—any museums, really—that can be described consistently as high quality are quite uncommon.

As a practical matter, the way to develop a truly high-quality children's museum experience means having a clear sense of what you want your museum to look like two, three or more years in the future—not just two months after opening! That means investing for the long-term in thoughtful experiences, materials, staff, and expertise.

In my exhibit design and development practice, I ask museum collaborators two simple questions: How will you (the staff inside your museum, not contractors or consultants) 1) fix things that break or don't work? and 2) transform great new ideas into real exhibits and programs? If you can't come up with credible answers to both questions, I'm afraid that not only will you be constantly racing to "put out fires" in the form of problems that could have been anticipated (as opposed to the many un-anticipated ones you'll encounter) but your bright, shiny museum will soon become dingy and boring, not only physically, but in its intellectual and emotional spirit as well.

Creating a strong institutional culture of internal capacity is the key difference between a great museum and a mediocre one. Building and investing in this strong institutional capacity doesn't mean that you work in isolation. On the contrary, carefully understanding the strengths and weaknesses across your institution makes it clear when and where you need to invest time and resources. Those investments in time and/or resources can involve seeking out expertise in your local communities, sending staff to national or regional conferences or local professional development opportunities, or (gasp!) bringing in consultants to help build up internal capacity in other areas of institutional need. There are many choices.

What is not a choice is doing nothing. Because doing nothing will surely begin the slide from "high quality" to "who cares?" And is that the kind of museum you want to be part of? 