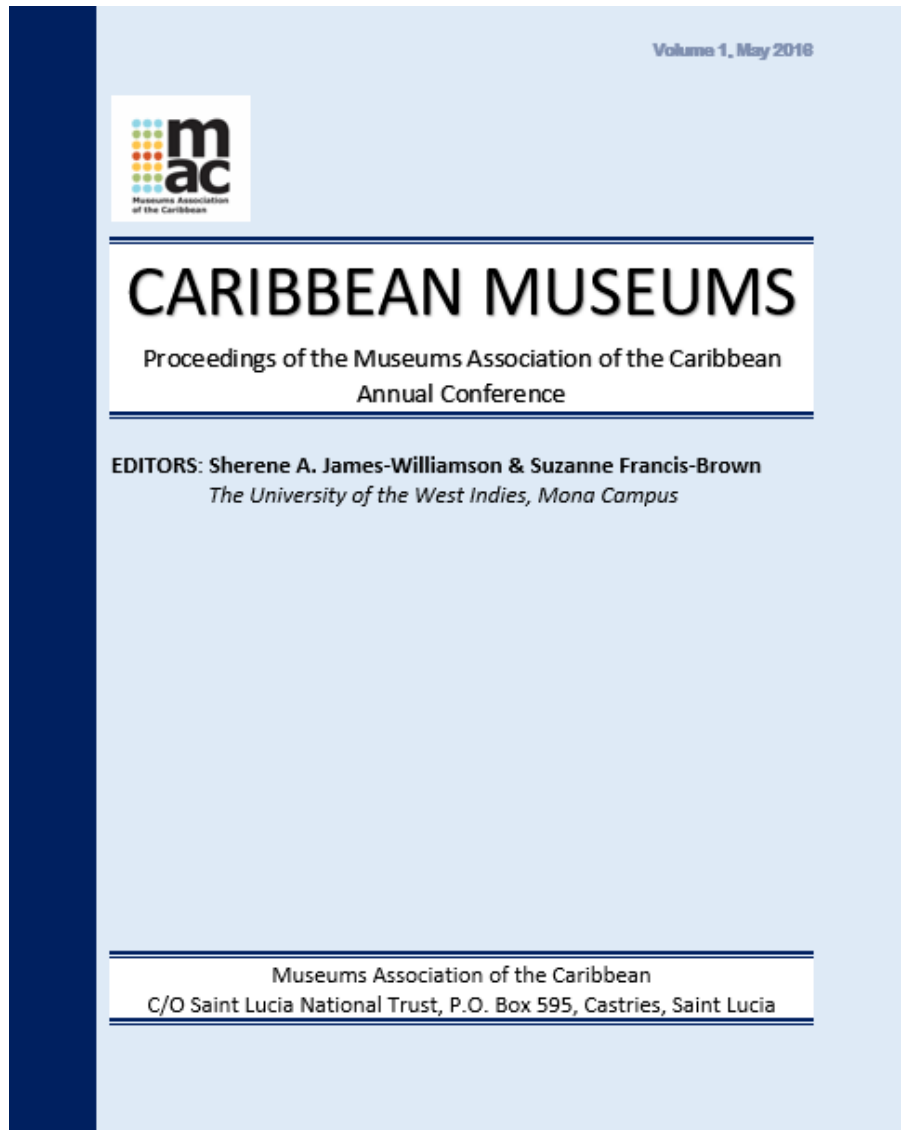


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Encouraging and Planning for Visitor Participation in Museum Exhibitions

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ABSTRACT: “Visitor participation” is not a new thing in the museum world; however, it has gained more attention and prominence lately because of the new tools available for participation such as social media, mobile apps, and other emerging technologies. Access to these tools enables anyone to create, share, and comment on content. Rather than disseminating knowledge to their visitors, museums are now learning to “let go” and share authority with members of the public on the information they present in their exhibitions and programs. By planning for visitor participation in their exhibitions, museums can transform the relationships they have with their audiences, bring in new audiences, and find opportunities for collaboration that will extend far beyond a single exhibition.

The practical strategies offered in the Manual of Museum Exhibitions and summarized in this paper can be adapted to any project of any type, size, or budget but the key is committing to a process and a management approach that will lead you to success.

Keywords: museum planning, museum exhibition, participatory experiences, visitor engagement

1. INTRODUCTION

“Visitor participation” is not a new thing in the museum world; however, it has gained more attention and prominence lately because of the new tools available for participation such as social media, mobile apps, and other emerging technologies. Furthermore, the rise of social media has created expectations for personalization, transparency and vocalization (Jenkins et al 2009) and access to these tools enables anyone to create, share, and comment on content. People are moving away from tradition forms of expression and choosing to participatory experiences or activities which are personalized and make them feel like their participation matters (Tepper and Ivy 2008).

This change to people’s behavior does not change the role of museums as the most trusted authority on history – over teachers, history texts, witnesses from the past and internet sites (Jedwab 2011) - but it changes museum’s role in their audiences’ role at museums. Rather than disseminating knowledge to their visitors, museums are now learning to “let go” and share authority with members of the public on the information they present in their exhibitions and programs. By planning for visitor participation in their exhibitions, museums can transform the relationships they have with their audiences, bring in new audiences, and find opportunities for collaboration that will extend far beyond a single exhibition.

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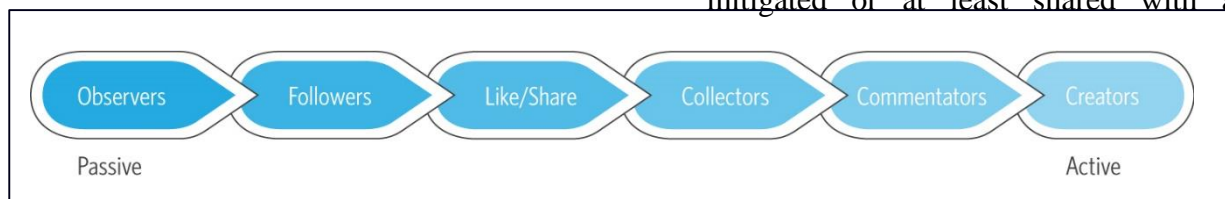


Figure 1: The Continuum of Participation (Modified after Lord and Piacente 2014)

Like their participation in social media, the level of participation from your visitors can range in varying degrees and comfort levels, from passive observers to the most active creators.

Allowing for visitor participation also requires a shift in our thinking. We understand and have heard time and time again the following points of apprehension:

- Fear of impact on staff time and resources
- Fear of failure.
- Fear of criticism.
- Fear of messiness and unpredictability.
- Fear of quality.
- Fear of “letting go” and sharing authority with visitors.

Whereas exhibition content is more traditional, authoritative, knowledge-sharing, these types of exhibits can be a bit of the unknown and loss of control. Participatory exhibits can be messy and they are almost always unpredictable. These types of programming can affect deployment and operations. However, with proper planning, clear goals and objectives (Simon 2012), sensitivity and openness to visitors, and well-chosen and intelligently designed tools for participation many of these risks can be

community who will respect the museum all the more for trying. You may be surprised with how open they are to share, be active or spark interests in others.

Once the museum has determined what its goals are for a participatory exhibition, it can then decide what kind of participatory experiences to include. There are four main categories of participatory exhibitions, although they are not mutually exclusive. In each of these types, the participation can be physical or virtual.

2. COMMUNITY CONSULTATION

The museum gathers content and input from a defined community or a broad public to inform the development of an exhibition. Museum staff are in complete control of what is produced. This form of participation is used generally to position the institution, to gather content, and to attract new audiences.

Example: In 2012 in preparation for a new permanent exhibition, the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Ottawa launched a public engagement process called “My History Museum” – asking members of the public what they would put in their history museum. The consultation process included widely distributed surveys, panel and roundtable, pop-up kiosks, and a highly visual and participatory website.



Figure 2: Public Engagement for the Canadian Museum of Civilization

3. CO-CREATED/CO-CURATED EXHIBITIONS

Members of the public or a community collaborate with museum staff to develop an exhibition. Depending on the extent of collaboration, this form of participation can achieve the full gamut of goals identified above. In co-created and co-curated exhibitions *the process of creation is as important as the product* – the actual exhibition – itself.

Example: The suburb of Kliptown in Johannesburg, South Africa is the 'birthplace' of the Freedom Charter, but also an impoverished area with little access to resources, high levels of crime, vandalism and social disconnection. The Kliptown Open Air Museum hired community curators to collect the primary research and oral histories connected to the Kliptown community for an exhibition on the Charter. The goal was to create a sense of pride in Kliptown as well as to create opportunities for local economic development.

4. OPEN EXHIBITS

The museum exhibition provides an ongoing opportunity on-site or on-line (or both) for visitors to respond, shape,

and/or transform the exhibition. Members of the public may not have been involved in the concept, planning or development of the exhibition; however their response to the work on display is critical for the success of the exhibition.

Example: Oakland Museum of California, History Things encourages active participation. One exhibit allows visitors can choose from a selection of whimsical "artifact" labels and take a photo within a display case. Another display encouraged visitors to contribute their opinions on unknown artifacts.



Figure 3: Oakland Museum "You Be the Thing" exhibit



Figure 4: Oakland Museum "You Be the Thing" exhibit

5. HOSTED EXHIBITS

Hosted exhibitions make space within a museum for an exhibition entirely

conceived and created by members of the public or a particular community. Beyond the initial invitation and selection, the museum has little control over the result. Hosted exhibitions tend to be temporary, viewing the museum as a platform and a hub for a community.

Example: Maker Spaces in libraries and museums seek to encourage members of the public to create new works for exhibitions, but also for participants' own projects. The Chattanooga Public Library in Tennessee, USA turned its fourth floor overcrowded storage space into a vibrant community Maker Space and event venue where visitors can make, create and collaborate on a wide range of design, technology and art projects.

Encouraging participation in a museum exhibition or institution should be seen as a process of considering the audience's needs and expectations, developing a project, testing it with the audience, and with the museum's operational staff and with museum stakeholders, constantly refining the project.

Regardless of the type of participatory exhibition or the tools that are being used there are a number of key ingredients that can help to make a participatory process more popular, more meaningful, and potentially more transformative:

- An Invitation
- A Reason and a Reward
- Social Objects
- Space
- Guidelines
- Options
- Response
- Access to Expertise
- Transparency
- Expectation

- A Dash of the Unexpected!

There are a number of reasons to encourage visitor participation in exhibitions and the indicators for success, including:

- **Positioning** - Positive feedback by the public, stakeholders and visitors.
- **Content gathering** - New knowledge created for the exhibition as a result of crowd-sourcing or community input.
- **Attract new audiences** - Growth in number of visitors from target groups will not only attract new audiences but encourage repeat and return visits.
- **Engage and empower audiences** - Visitors report feeling more confident and empowered. Increase in number of contributions from visitors. Increase in number of repeat visitors. Increase in length of stay. Positive feedback from other visitors on content of exhibition.
- **Create connections among visitors** - Increase in opportunities for different visitors to engage with one another. Increase in self-reported connections made among visitors.
- **Support connected learning** - Repeated use of museum exhibition as a resource for visitors' own projects. Evidence of applying this learning in their projects.
- **Build community** - Ongoing intrapersonal activity, encourage bridging personal gaps or create areas for people from different walks of life to bond (Simon 2015). Increase in demand for hosted exhibitions. Increase in

participation on co-created opportunities.

- **Transformation** - Self-reported transformation. Studies demonstrating new behaviour or thinking as a result of museum visit.

Participatory exhibits are about embracing the culture of participation in our time. Their potential to forge a new relationship with existing and new visitors based on collaboration, creativity and the recognition of multiple voices and multiple forms of knowledge is truly exciting.

It is also necessary. As more and more young people turn away from museums to other forms of culture museums need to change the terms of engagement. In this digital age museums need to live up to their potential as places that are indispensable resources (Friedlander 2013) and places of connection within our communities and our society for everyone.

6. POSTSCRIPT

Lord Cultural Resources has planned and executed hundreds of museum exhibition projects. This experience is shared in the *Manual of Museum Exhibitions, Second Edition*, published in April 2014. The practical strategies offered in the *Manual of Museum Exhibitions* can be adapted to any project of any type, size, or budget but the key is committing to a process and a management approach that will lead you to success.

Since the first edition of this book in 2001, there has been a worldwide explosion of new galleries and exhibitions halls and new ideas about how exhibitions should look and

communicate. Our definition of what an exhibition is has changed. One of the biggest influences has been the emergence of social media and new mobile technologies, which have allowed for visitors to engage with exhibitions in new and exciting ways.

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