Excerpts form a paper entitled Tips and concepts for planning truly "Interpretive" Exhibits. By John A. Veverka

Are your exhibits giving answers to questions that no one is asking?

Are they full of "information" but not translation of the topics in terms that the visitors can understand or relate to?

Do the "look nice" (they better – you probably paid a lot for them), but the visitors don't seem to learn or remember anything from them? If this is the case, you don't have "interpretive" exhibits.

I have noticed over the years that almost every exhibit is called an interpretive exhibit, while most of them don't actually "interpret" anything – they just simply present information. The problem is that quite often there is a lack of knowledge as to what makes an interpretive exhibit "interpretive".

Remember, YOU are not your audience.

An exhibit is an array of cues (visual, auditory, sensory, etc.) purposely brought together within a defined boundary for a desired effect.

In general, I believe that exhibits are probably one of the least cost-effective methods available for communicating with visitors – particularly if they have not been pre-tested prior to their final construction. But, given that, here are some reasons for exhibits.

- Tell a story in an ordered sequence or fashion.
- Tell a story that can't be told or illustrated on site.
- Bring artefacts and stories to places where

the visitors are.

- Bring extremes into human scale
- Allow visitors the freedom to pace themselves.
- Allow staff to do other things.

In planning "interpretive" exhibits, we should have an operational definition of what "interpretation" is. The definition I prefer is:

Interpretation is a communication process designed to reveal meanings and relationships of our cultural and natural heritage, to the public, through first hand experiences with objects, artefacts, landscapes, or sites.

An interpretive exhibit makes its topic "come to life" through active visitor involvement and extreme relevance to the everyday life of the visitor/viewer. Interpretive exhibits should:

- Employ interpretive techniques and principles (Tilden's Interpretive Principles).
- Provoke the visitor's interest or attention.
- Relate to the everyday life of the visitor.
- Reveal the main concept in a unique, creative ending or viewpoint.
- Address the whole illustrate the main interpretive theme of the gallery or exhibit group of which it is a part.
- Have message unity (design elements that support the theme).
- Be objective and outcome based (have learning, behavioural and emotional objectives).

The two basic questions an interpretive exhibit planner must ask and answer as part of the exhibit interpretive planning process are:

- 1. Why would a visitor want to know this (information or topic that the exhibit is presenting)? If you can't think of reasons visitors would want to know this how can you "provoke" them into wanting to look at the exhibit and interact with it?
- 2. How do you want the visitor to use the information the exhibit is presenting? If you don't want the visitor to use any of the information in the exhibit (or the visitor can't use any of the information or concepts presented in the exhibit), then why are you giving the information to them?

Exhibit load is the term I use to describe the amount of time and energy (both physical and psychological) that each exhibit requires the visitor to use up in interacting with that particular exhibit. Think of the visitor coming to a museum or interpretive center with 100% enthusiasm, interest, and excitement when they first enter the exhibit area. As they move through the exhibits they are using up emotional energy and interest in the exhibits begin to drop – they start to get psychologically tired and overloaded with information and stimuli. And, usually within about 45 minutes, the visitor has had enough and heads for the gift store or the lunchroom.

Usually the exhibits with the highest "load" are the interactive ones that require mind and physical coordination – more thought process (and easier mental fatigue), and the low load exhibits are the more passive ones, such as flat work graphics, collections behind glass, paintings, etc.

When you are planning how your interpretive exhibits will work with visitors, here are some of the "exhibit contact steps" that occur:

First – exhibits must have ATTRACTION POWER.

This means that when a visitors walks into an exhibit gallery or room and scans the exhibits, there has to be something in the exhibit (provocative header, powerful graphics, interesting artefacts, etc.) that will draw or attract the visitor to that exhibit.

Second – comes HOLDING POWER

The exhibit has enough material (copy, artefacts, content, etc.) that once the visitor sees the exhibit up close, they are provoked or curious about it enough to stay and spend more time with it.

Third - ENGAGEMENT POWER

There is enough curiosity raised (holding power) that the visitor is willing to follow through and read label copy, do the hands on activity, watch the video, etc. These first three steps only take about 10-15 seconds to work through.

After the visitor has read or interacted with the exhibit, the next steps in the sequence are:

The material was presented in such a way (relate, reveal) that the visitor understands the main concept(s) presented in the exhibit. This then leads us to the final part of the exhibit communication sequence which is Outcomes –

If the visitor understands the message or story that the exhibit presented, then the final outcome of the exhibit is that its Learning, Behavioural and Emotional objectives have been accomplished. This makes the exhibit "successful"

The Visitors and Exhibits – More rules of thumb.

Over the past 20 years of working with many different exhibit design and build firms, and looking at exhibit evaluation research, here are some things we have learned:

- Visitors do not really like to read labels. If a label is over 50 words long it probably will not be read. If the label uses small type size (most exhibit labels should be at least 30 point) there is an even greater chance it will not be read. If the label is put on glass, there is even a less chance of it being read.
- Provocative headlines and graphics will draw attention.
- If you can't get the main point or concept of the exhibit across to visitors within 15 seconds, you probably won't get it across at all.
- Visitors will be drawn to exhibits that have information or artefacts of intrinsic interest to them.