

Decoding the Blockbuster: Developing an Evaluation System for Feature Exhibitions in Non-Art Museums

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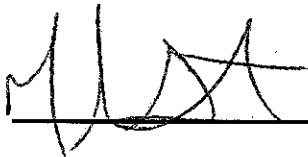
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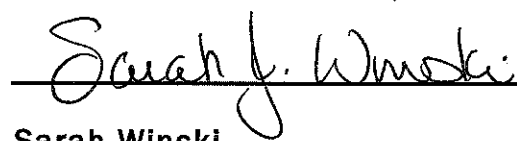
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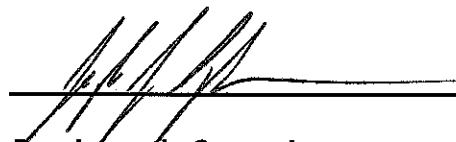
December 7, 2012

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Melissa Smith', written over a horizontal line.

Melissa Smith

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sarah J. Winski', written over a horizontal line.

Sarah Winski

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dr. Joseph Gonzales', written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Joseph Gonzales

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King Tut ... He gave his life for tourism.
- *Steve Martin*



Photo Courtesy of NBC.

Abstract

Blockbuster exhibitions have the power to help museums reach broad audiences, and provide visitors the opportunity to experience a topic they find interesting in greater depth. This thesis takes the first step towards understanding what experiences in feature exhibitions are most popular with visitors, and uses that information to create a tool to help museums evaluate a show's potential for success. Through the use of independent research, interviews with leaders in the field, and a publicly distributed survey, the experiential elements identified as drivers of success herein are *Relatability and Cultural Relevance*, *Rarity*, *Reverential Subject Matter*, *The Icon Artifact*, and *Voice*. The piece also includes an examination of how the field understands visitor experience, ways that museums can combat the blockbuster controversy, and an overview of new ways to look at blockbusters for the future.

Dedication

For my Family without you, I would not be here.

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I would like to extend my deepest thanks to my advisor and committee chair, Dr. Joseph Gonzales. Your guidance throughout this process has been invaluable.

A heartfelt thank-you to my other committee members: Melissa Smith of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and Sarah Winski of the National Constitution Center. Your knowledge, assistance and constant support made this possible.

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Table of Contents

List of Images	vii
Nomenclature	ix
Chapter I: Introduction	1
Impact	9
Methodology	13
Chapter II: Literature Review	16
Why Understanding Experience Is So Important	17
The Evolution of the Modern Exhibition.....	19
Elements Within an Exhibition that Create Visitor Experience	25
Models For Understanding.....	30
Where the Field Is Going.....	36
Chapter III: Combating the Blockbuster Controversy	38
Mission Drift	39
The Content Critique	43
Over-Commercialization	46
Chapter IV: Decoding the Blockbuster	50
Relatability / Cultural Relevance	51
Rarity.....	60
Reverential Subject Matter.....	66
The Icon Artifact	72
Voice	78
Chapter V: Conclusions	86
Furtherance of the Study	98
 Appendix I: Exhibition Evaluation Tool.....	 105
Appendix II: Survey Instrument.....	107
Appendix III: Complete Survey Results	109
Bibliography	117

List of Images

Inset Image (i): Steve Martin performing "King Tut" on *Saturday Night Live*, 1978. Photo courtesy of NBC.

Figure 1: Lines of visitors waiting outside the British Museum to enter *The Treasures of Tutankhamun* in 1972. Photo courtesy of the UK Daily Mail. Page 1.

Fig. 2: The King Tut exhibition at the Franklin Institute in 2007. Photo courtesy of the Franklin Institute. Page 2.

Fig. 3: Distinctions of Economic Offerings, Pine and Gilmore. Page 18.

Fig. 4: Falk and Dierking Interactive Experience Model. Page 31.

Fig. 5: Ted Ansbacher's Inquiry Cycle Model. Page 32.

Fig. 6: Zahava Doering's Visitor Experience Model. Page 34.

Fig. 7: Original design infographic featuring the five experiential elements. Page 51.

Fig. 8: Responses to the survey question of what motivates attendance to a feature exhibition. Screen shot courtesy of surveymonkey.com. Page 52.

Fig. 9: *Infinite Variety: Three Centuries of Red and White Quilts*, displayed in New York's Park Avenue Armory in 2011. Photo courtesy of National Geographic. Page 65.

Fig. 10: A plaster cast of bodies found in the destruction of Pompeii at the *Day in Pompeii* exhibition at the Cincinnati Museum Center. Photo courtesy of the *Columbus Dispatch*. Page 66.

Fig. 11: Visitor holds recreation Titanic boarding pass at the Franklin Institute in 2012. Photo courtesy of the Franklin Institute. Page 69.

Fig. 12: Lady Diana Spencer's wedding gown and bridesmaid dress on display at the National Constitution Center in 2009. Photo courtesy of the Mainline Media News. Page 76.

Fig. 13: Visitors to Diana: The Exhibition during its run in Bloomington, MN look at a display of Diana's childhood toys. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Daily News. Page 82.

Fig. 14: Human specimen on display in *Body Worlds*. Photo courtesy of The Franklin Institute. Page 83.

Fig. 15: Original word cloud, created using wordle.net. Page 86.

Fig. 16: Princess Diana exhibition logo. Image courtesy of the Frazier History Museum. Page 94.

Table 1: Responses to the survey question of what makes the theme of an exhibition interesting enough to prompt your attendance. Page 53.

Table 2: Responses to the survey question of what made you attend a feature exhibition. Page 54.

Table 3: Responses to the survey question of what makes the theme of an exhibition interesting enough to prompt your attendance. Page 62.

Table 4: Responses to the survey question of what made visitors attend a feature exhibition. Page 63.

Table 5: Responses to the survey question of what made visitors attend a feature exhibition. Page 73.

Table 6: Responses to the survey question of what makes a feature exhibition engaging. Page 79.

Table 7: Coded responses of experiential content. Page 79.

Table 8: Responses to the survey question of what makes a feature exhibition extraordinary. Page 80.

Nomenclature

Feature Exhibition: A temporary museum exhibition. These may have been developed in-house, or rented from another institution or exhibition development firm. They are hosted within institutions as supplements to the existing permanent exhibitions, although there is no specific designation for the length of the run.

Blockbuster: A feature exhibition that has successfully reached an intended level of popularity, and appeals to broad audiences beyond typical museum-goers.

Popular/Popularity: Well-attended. Attendance evaluation is based on numbers of visitors to other feature exhibitions at the same host institution, over the total length of the show's run.

Chapter I: Introduction

King Tut. Baseball As America. Harry Potter: The Exhibition. The options for potential ‘blockbuster’ topics in non-art museums are seemingly endless. How, then, does a museum make the all-important decision of which temporary exhibitions will be featured in their institution? Imagine the lines of visitors waiting for admission to the original opening of the *Treasures of Tutankhamun* exhibition at the British Museum in 1972. The show was visited by 1,694,117 people in nine months¹ and was the first true blockbuster – a feature exhibition that drew huge crowds and resonated with an incredibly wide and variant audience reaching far beyond the routine museum-goer.



Figure 1: Lines of visitors waiting outside the British Museum to enter *The Treasures of Tutankhamun* in 1972. Photo courtesy of the UK Daily Mail.

¹ Emma Barker, “Exhibiting the Canon: the Blockbuster Show,” in *Contemporary Cultures of Display* (London: Yale University Press, 1999), 128.



Fig. 2: The King Tut exhibition at the Franklin Institute in 2007. Photo courtesy of the Franklin Institute.

The boy king scored another home run when the exhibition's contemporary iteration came to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania's Franklin Institute, with a total visitation of more than 1,300,000 people in eight months.² But what was the origin of *Tut*'s magic? What compelled more people in Philadelphia to visit an exhibition about the late Princess Diana than one at the same institution about regional native son Bruce Springsteen? If museums were able to gain a better understanding of the driving factors behind the success of exhibitions that reach blockbuster status, they could find ways to reach broader

² "Technical Memorandum: Economic Impact of the *Tutankhamun and the Golden Age of the Pharaohs* Exhibition," prepared by Urban Partners for the Franklin Institute, November 2007.

audiences, position themselves at more a consistent level of relevance to the public, and develop even stronger relationships with their visitors.

Certainly art and non-art museums (i.e. historical, cultural and science museums) share the blockbuster phenomenon. Although many of the principals behind blockbusters are the same regardless of the type of exhibition, there are also key differences which must be acknowledged when beginning to study them. For example, narrative style and exhibition design can be approached with different strategies appropriate for the content. As such, in respect for those differences, this study distinguishes between the two.

How, then, can we define a blockbuster? For the purpose of this study, a blockbuster exhibition is one which has achieved widespread popularity as evidenced by attendance figures that exceeded the host institution's initial projections.³ Granted, not every exhibition can be *King Tut*. It is also important to note that not all feature exhibitions are intended to be blockbusters. Each individual feature within a host institution is approached with specific goals. They are also given budgets, exhibition space, and target audience distinctions commensurate with those goals. Their success is measured by whether or not they have met those goals, and blockbusters serve a distinct purpose in the feature exhibition spectrum.

³ In some cases, exhibitions cited as examples of successful blockbusters were identified as such by senior staff of their host institutions within interviews performed for this thesis.

Yet, there are plenty of temporary exhibitions that have been touted and marketed as blockbusters yet failed to deliver on their promise. The success stories, however, prove that museums have incredible potential to reach these extended audiences. If the field could identify specific elements of blockbusters that affect their popularity with the public, that could in turn inform the decision-making process behind feature exhibitions, and help museums achieve more consistent success. The goal of this thesis is to take the first step.

To begin, it is important to understand the current feature exhibition decision processes within host institutions. Although the specifics vary, museums generally collaborate across departments to evaluate the potential candidates, then make final decisions based on which shows they believe will strike the proper institutional notes and interest the public. Although a number of large museums have certainly found successful ways to assess exhibition themes within their own institutions, there is no universal system in place to help evaluate exhibition themes on their potential to reach the coveted blockbuster status. The decision about whether or not an exhibit theme will be popular with visitors generally comes down to the educated opinions around the senior staff and boardroom tables.

Of course, the process of determining an exhibition schedule is a strategic one, and not every feature needs to or should necessarily be a

blockbuster. The hallmark of a successful institutional approach towards exhibitions is not necessarily a string of high dollar value blockbusters, but rather the evidence that the museum has consistently met its expectations with their features. These expectations also extend far beyond attendance figures, and can include budgetary, interpretive, development and design-based goals. At times a museum will opt for a smaller, more intimate show designed to highlight an institutionally significant topic. Although an exhibition like this may not draw record crowds, it can sometimes resonate more harmoniously with the institution as a whole and pointedly address the aforementioned goals that lay outside the scope of attendance.

But when the time is right for a blockbuster – whatever the reasoning may be – success is required to earn the desired return on the investment. So how can we distill the ingredients of a successful show, and organize them in a methodical way? The first step is to recognize the variance of factors that contribute to an exhibition’s popularity, and understand their cause and effect relationships with one another. External efforts such as marketing, publicity, product tie-ins, and special events play a significant role in determining whether or not an exhibition is successful. The same applies to other areas of promotion such as partnerships and corporate sponsorships. One excellent example of the influence of these elements was the National Constitution Center (NCC)’s exhibition that centered around one of the most famous

founding fathers, *Benjamin Franklin: In Search of a Better World*. Running from December 15, 2005 to April 30, 2006, the exhibition's stay in Philadelphia at the NCC was organized in partnership with the Benjamin Franklin Tercentenary. The exhibition was the centerpiece of the Ben Franklin 300 Philadelphia celebration commemorating the 300th anniversary of Franklin's birth, and was widely publicized as the most important piece in the collection of related works across the city.⁴ Not surprisingly, it was also a smashing success for the NCC.

Although *Franklin* certainly met several of the criteria for a successful blockbuster discussed later, the circumstances surrounding it beg the question of whether it would have reached the same heights if the marketing campaigns for the exhibition and the tercentenary in general had not been so omnipresent. It is clear that these factors are extremely important, and certainly have a great deal of influence over a blockbuster's success.

Of course, not every intended blockbuster can have the inertia of the events associated with *Franklin* or the extraordinary hype surrounding *Tut*. *Franklin*-esque exceptions aside, most successful blockbusters reach that status without those extraordinary advantages. Marketing certainly plays a key role in the success of every feature exhibition, and it is impossible to discount. This study, however, does not concentrate on marketing based on the understanding that if an institution expects a good return on a new blockbuster investment,

⁴ "Past Exhibitions: Benjamin Franklin", <http://constitutioncenter.org/experience/exhibitions/past-exhibitions/benjamin-franklin/>, accessed 11/27/12.

then the exhibition's marketing plan and budget should be commensurate to that of its predecessors.

The X Factor that propels certain exhibitions beyond the blockbuster threshold discussed in this study lies within the space itself: the visitor's experience therein. The visitor experience within the exhibition can make or break the blockbuster because it is what drives that most powerful means of advertising—word of mouth. It is when the exceptional experience within the exhibition inspires a visitor to recommend it to others that the show's popularity can grow exponentially. When asked in a recent interview what he believes makes blockbusters so popular aside from marketing and good press, the Franklin Institute's Vice President of Exhibitions Steven Snyder said, "Word of mouth. Absolutely, positively, more than anything else. You can get the word out there, but for someone to come away and say *I saw that, and you've got to see it*, that's the thing... [that] drove it"⁵ Snyder's conclusion is supported by numerous responses to an original research survey conducted for this study. One response noted that an exhibition's "reputation for being interesting and displayed in a modern way" was the primary driver behind their interest in it. Similarly, when asked why they chose to attend a feature exhibition, one respondent wrote "the aspect that everyone was talking about it and making a big deal about 'having' to see it."

⁵ Interview with Steven Snyder, Sep. 17, 2012.

The nature of the answers to the survey question “what makes a feature exhibition interesting and engaging to you?” are also evidence of the power of the visitor experience. Although open-ended, a majority of 51%⁶ of respondents cited the experiential elements within the exhibition as the answer. One specific answer to that question read “Not just the subject matter, but also how it's displayed. My favorite museums or exhibitions are ones where the display or the space involved really enhance the exhibition and move you through a story or timeline.” As evidenced by the breadth of that answer, there are many different types of experiential elements within feature exhibitions. However, this study begins to identify those elements that visitors find most engaging and compelling, and provides new insight that museums can use to supplement their current feature exhibition strategy.

Of course, the experience and insight of the aforementioned decision-makers within these museums is invaluable. This study is not meant to countermand or supersede the professional instincts around the table, but rather to provide an additional layer of information to help inform them. The intended outcome of this study is an initial set of criteria for experiences that have proven successful with visitors, and by which future blockbusters can be measured.

⁶ The next closest tally of responses at 29% cited the exhibition's topic.

Impact

This work is important for the field in that it is the first of its kind.

Although most museums conduct front-end evaluations to determine how well potential themes will perform with their visitors, these surveys offer a pre-prescribed list of exhibition candidates. This study examines the experiential elements within feature exhibitions that visitors find most engaging in general, and thus provides a first glimpse of overarching patterns and preferences. As such, it will help bridge the gap between guesswork and results, and give museums another tool to help ensure their success in an unstable economic climate.

On the surface this may seem like a tool that would only be used by exhibit designers and content developers, as they are the ones who ultimately create the experience. The reality, however, is that this information should be used by different departments in concert with one another to achieve optimal results. For example, knowing the experiences within the exhibition that drive popularity can aid the development of a marketing strategy. This inter-departmental communication can also foster a greater level of creativity in how an institution can optimize its resources to ensure that an exhibition meets all the experiential guidelines.

Access to the information within this study also has significant implications for several different levels of museum administration:

Exhibition Development

This study provides insight into the way visitors experience exhibitions, and the way they assign value to those experiences. By gaining this deeper understanding, museums will have an additional way to determine what features an exhibit should have in order to encourage positive visitor experience. By meeting these criteria, exhibits will have a stronger likelihood to be popular and well received by their public.

Marketing and External Communication

This study begins to provide a clear outline of the experiential elements within exhibitions that the public is interested in and responds well to. This in turn will offer guidance for more effective communication in marketing materials. As previously noted, it is also important to realize that marketing and external communications are departments within a museum that can affect visitor experience.

Programming

This study can provide museums with insights into ways of being more strategic with their programming efforts. For example, if an upcoming exhibit meets all but one of the criteria, the missing piece could potentially be addressed in programming. Although serious deficiencies within an exhibition cannot solely be fixed with programming, a host institution could potentially

use this resource to highlight or expand upon desired experiential elements. These programs could then be marketed on a large scale so that every base is covered when the exhibit is rolled out to the public. By understanding what elements of exhibitions that are universally popular and successful in engaging the public, programming efforts for permanent exhibitions can also be re-examined if desired.

The Board and Potential Funders

This system will serve not only as a tool for gauging the potential success of a feature exhibition, but also for demonstrating its potential *for* success to board members and prospective funders. If a museum could approach funders for an upcoming exhibition with increased confidence in its potential to attract visitors and offer them a meaningful and enjoyable experience, it would significantly improve the chances for a successful pitch. Similarly, museum boards have agendas that are primarily twofold: to mount exhibitions and programming that support the mission of the institution and appeal to the public, and to keep the museum financially viable and able to invest in the future. The information in this study can help on both counts by providing a solid foundation on which to base an exhibition's propensity for popularity, and its likelihood to return on the investment.

Visitors

This study will provide museums with another layer of insight to help develop or host exhibitions that visitors will want to see, and experiences therein that are memorable and engaging. As museums improve their ability to speak the language of their visitors, they will have more success not only with bringing them through the door and keeping their interest, but also with giving them the information the institution finds important. When an institution is developing an exhibit in-house, it can make sure the content does X for visitors. Typically, however, museums rent and host large scale blockbusters rather than develop them in house. When considering rental exhibitions, a host institution can use this research as a tool to decide which shows to bring in, and to evaluate if and which adjustments might be made if resources allow. Exhibitions have multiple purposes in that they are meant to be interesting to the visitor and give them information they want to know, but are also designed as vehicles for the museum to present ideas and objects important for visitors to understand and appreciate whether they would initially be interested in them or not. By providing the best possible visitor experience within a feature exhibition, museums can be more effective in reaching this second goal.

Methodology

In order to begin to understand the overarching elements of experience within exhibitions that visitors find most engaging, this study employs several research methods.

Independent Research

The independent academic research for this thesis is concentrated primarily on determining the existing body of literature concerning visitor experience in museums, with particular emphasis on experience within exhibition space. Although the results are largely concentrated in the literature review, it also supports the found data and resulting conclusions. The research informing this study also includes the available literature concerning blockbuster exhibitions in general. This encompasses the existing arguments for and against them, as well as an extensive collection of commentary on examples of both successful and unsuccessful shows. Reviews of successful blockbusters in newspapers and online journals were also studied to understand positive experiences within actual exhibitions.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted with active museum professionals within several different areas of institutional operation. The breadth of professional expertise and opinion gathered through these interviews represents an

inclusive exploration of current thought on these topics. The following individuals have given interviews that are included in the research for this thesis:

- Tom Hennes, Owner and Lead Designer, *Thinc Design*
- Pam E. Kosty, Director of Public Relations, *University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology*
- Kate Quinn, Director of Exhibits/Lead Exhibit Designer, *University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology*
- Stephanie Reyer, VP of Exhibits, *National Constitution Center*
- Melissa Smith, Chief Operating Officer, *University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology*
- Steven L. Snyder, VP of Exhibit and Program Development, *The Franklin Institute*

Surveys

An original survey designed to gather information concerning the most engaging elements of visitor experience was publicly distributed through an online service, and 85 responses were collected; enough to begin to identify relevant and informative trends in the data.

The link to the survey was distributed through multiple forums including various social media sites, wide email distribution, and face-to-face exchanges. The distribution of the surveys was purposefully as widespread and random as possible in order to collect responses that were representative of an extended blockbuster audience. The survey instrument was comprised of multiple choice and free response questions, and can be found in its entirety Appendix I.

In order to fully quantify the survey data, the free responses were coded according to thematic threads that appeared throughout. Each free response question was given a set of codes representative of the responses. The number of the responses that reflected these codes was then tallied in order to show the percentage of the total for each. Responses were given all appropriate codes, and therefore the total percentage points on for each response equal more than 100%.

Chapter II: Literature Review

When beginning a discussion of how visitor experience in a blockbuster exhibition may contribute to its popularity, it is necessary to explore how the field currently understands that visitor experience. As John Falk wrote in a paper presented at the annual conference of the International Committee for Museology in 2011, within the construct we call the *museum experience* lie answers to fundamental questions about the very worth of museums – how museums make a difference within society and how they support the public’s understandings of the world as well as themselves.⁷

There are several broad themes that combine to form a complete picture of how visitor experience in museums is studied and understood. Firstly, we must have a firm understanding of why the concept of experience is so important to today’s museums. Furthermore, we must understand the evolution of the modern exhibit, and how exhibitions have morphed over time from static presentations of objects to the multi-media, multi-sensory environments we see today. This study also helps explain how contemporary exhibitions attract visitors, and why they have continued to be successful as an engaging medium. Thirdly, we must explore the various ways in which exhibitions provide opportunities for their visitors to create experiences within the physical space.

⁷ John Falk, “Reconceptualizing the Museum Visitor Experience: Who Visits, Why, and to What Affect?” (Paper presented at the annual meeting for ICOFOM, Taipei, Taiwan, October 22–27, 2011).

And finally, we must examine each of the existing academic models defining and categorizing experience.

A holistic study of all these elements is the only way to achieve a complete understanding of the importance of and scholarship surrounding contemporary museum visitor experience. That understanding is then the basis from which conclusions can be drawn about how that experience relates to the popularity of individual exhibitions.

Why Understanding Experience Is So Important

Richard Lanham describes our contemporary world as one where attention has become a commodity.⁸ He argues that consumers are no longer trading simply in solid goods, but that they are doing so with their own time and attention. In their book *The Experience Economy*, Joseph Pine and James Gilmore take this idea of the commoditization of attention one step further, and assert that we are in fact participating in an economy that is driven by experience. In the first chapter, they contend that in order for any business to be successful in the contemporary economic era, they must begin to see experience as a valued marketable quantity on an equal level with commodities, goods and services.⁹ Although Pine and Gilmore focus on the private sector,

⁸ Richard A. Lanham, "Stuff and Fluff," in *The Economics of Attention*, ed. Richard A. Lanham et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006) 1-41.

⁹ Joseph Pine and James Gilmore, *The Experience Economy* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999), pg. 6.

this model should absolutely be applied to museums, as they are in the business of competing for the leisure time of their visitors.

Economic Distinctions				
Economic Offering	Commodities	Goods	Services	Experiences
Economy	Agrarian	Industrial	Service	Experience
Economic Function	Extract	Make	Deliver	Stage
Nature of Offering	Fungible	Tangible	Intangible	Memorable
Key Attribute	Natural	Standardized	Customized	Personal
Method of Supply	Stored in bulk	Inventoried after production	Delivered on demand	Revealed over a duration
Seller	Trader	Manufacturer	Provider	Stager
Buyer	Market	User	Client	Guest
Factors of Demand	Characteristics	Features	Benefits	Sensations

Fig. 3: Distinctions of Economic Offerings, Pine and Gilmore.

This is a distinctly important concept to understand in the current economic climate when thinking about blockbuster exhibitions. As generally hefty investments on the part of their host institutions, if a show doesn't deliver as promised it can have drastic consequences. Approaching a feature exhibition with a concentration on the experiences it could provide for its visitors from the very beginning of the process is one way to help an institution hedge its bet.

Yet another observation about the value and importance of experience within exhibitions is that although museums must strive to do their best to provide stimulating experiences for their visitors, they must also be careful to

remember the autonomy of the visitor in responding to them and creating follow-on experiences for themselves. Tom Hennes, owner of the New York based exhibition design firm Thinc Design wrote in a 2002 article that Pine and Gilmore define experience as something designed, in which the participant plays a role shaped by the entity that designs it. What is most disturbing about this for museums, he writes, is that this definition of experience represents a veiled form of manipulation. Pre-defining the outcome of the experience is that goal of marketing; it is not the open-ended enrichment and pleasure that museums, at their best, can provide.¹⁰

The Evolution of the Modern Exhibit

Consider today's exhibitions: most are large-scale shows with a variety of multi-media and multi-sensory experiences integrated with traditional objects and written interpretive content. This, of course, was not always the case. Museums began as institutions built to house collections of oddities that their collectors found interesting. The earliest museums were known as cabinets of curiosities, and did little more than simply display objects. In his article "Museums, Merchandising, and Popular Taste," Neil Harris writes that turn of the century museums functioned as educational playgrounds.¹¹ The emphasis

¹⁰ Tom Hennes, "Rethinking the Visitor Experience," *Curator* 45 (2002): 107.

¹¹ Neil Harris, "Museums, Merchandising, and Popular Taste: The Struggle for Influence," in *Cultural Excursions: Marketing Appetites and Cultural Tastes in Modern America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pg. 61.

on the objects themselves was paramount, but there was no purposeful interpretation or concern for the audience's preferences. The absence of consciousness of the visitor led John Wannamaker to write in 1907 that most everything in museums looks like junk even when it isn't, because there is no care or thought in the display.¹²

Museums have certainly come a long way from these humble beginnings in terms of how they envision their role in relation to the public and their visitors. Proof of that is evident through a casual visit to almost any museum in the country.¹³ As we have moved steadily toward the experience economy, and museums steadily developed the need to draw more visitors, this shift was inevitable. In a chapter of his 2002 book *Making Museums Matter* entitled "From Being *about* Something to Being *for* Somebody: The Ongoing Transformation of the American Museum", Stephen Weil discusses the shift taking place in modern museums signifying that they are no longer focused simply on caring for objects and displaying them with no public context.

Rather, he argues, contemporary museums are much more public focused. Weil also cites three primary currents driving this shift. The first is economic necessity, otherwise known as the box-office factor. The second is the field's changing ideology as transmitted not only through such major

¹² *Ibid*, quoting John Wannamaker, pg. 65.

¹³ Some museums, such as the Wagner Free Institute of Science and the Mutter Museum, both in Philadelphia, PA, have retained their authentic 19th century displays. They are each unique examples of what I deem a 'museum double-entendre': an actively collecting institution as well as a museum of antiquated display practice itself.

professional associations as the American Association of Museums, the Association of Science Technology Centers, the Association of Youth Museums and the International Council of Museums, but through countless smaller ones as well.¹⁴ “The second current pushing American museums forward is a local one. Weil contends that the non-profit sector is in the midst of profound change as to how it evaluates its constituent organizations as worthy of funding. Increasingly, the principal emphasis is on the results that an organization can actually achieve.¹⁵ This is to say that in order for museums to make a compelling case for funding in today’s environment, they must be able to show how their work and their content have positive effects for their visitors and the community.

The shift in museums from concentrating on the conservation and interpretation of objects to focusing primarily on what that conservation and interpretation can do for their visitors directly correlates with the evolution of today’s exhibitions. Although the timelines may not sync exactly multi-faceted blockbusters showed up long before Weil’s 2002 essay the visitor-centric thinking behind them is much the same. There have been countless examples of scholarship and professional studies highlighting this fundamental redirection of institutional focus onto the visitor.

¹⁴ Stephen E. Weil, “From Being *about* Something to Being *for* Somebody: The Ongoing Transformation of the American Museum,” in *Making Museums Matter* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), 35.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, pg. 36.

A report prepared by the Smithsonian's Office of Policy and Analysis provides an institutional overview of the different ways that their audiences view, experience, and relate to exhibitions. It is divided into two sections – 'The Smithsonian Visit and Visitor Experiences' and 'Expanding Smithsonian Audiences'. 'Visit and Visitor Experiences' is divided into the following: Visitors' perceptions of the Smithsonian, Types of Experiences, Comparative Differences, Visitors and Learning, and Visitor Motivations. The report is a valuable example of the field's current focus on the visitor, and how museums currently view their audiences and the experiences provided to them.

One interesting insight noted in the report is that visitors tend to avoid museums on the basis of generalized perceptions about the types of experiences available inside them.¹⁶ Here again is evidence supporting the importance of understanding and concertedly designing positive visitor experience. This report is also a very useful insider view of how the museum community currently views the *expectations* of the audience and how they relate to experience. These evolving expectations have also prompted the evolution of feature exhibitions into multi-dimensional experiences. Blockbusters could be considered the most highly realized versions of the 'modern' exhibit.

Another lens through which to view the evolution of the modern exhibition is that of cultural relevance. As audiences begin to expect more from

¹⁶ Smithsonian Institution Office of Policy and Analysis, "Exhibitions and their Audiences: Actual and Potential" (Washington: Smithsonian Institution), 2002, Pg. 7.

museums, institutions in turn find themselves with opportunities to address public need. In a *Journal of Museum Education* article from 2006, Douglas Worts lays out one potential way for museums to evaluate their effectiveness in terms of how they address the cultural needs of their communities.

The piece is a description of the Critical Assessment Framework (CAF), created for this evaluation purpose by the Canadian organization The Working Group on Museums and Sustainable Communities (WGMSC). Worts writes that culture is a mechanism for human adaptations within a world that is constantly changing, one that requires that the very essence of human worldviews must evolve as the reality of our planetary context shifts.”¹⁷ He contends that museums have the potential to play a vital role in the process of helping visitors with the present cultural challenge of adapting to a rapidly changing external reality. To do this, however, they must be willing to examine the core assumptions of what museums do and how they measure their impacts in cultural terms.¹⁸ As museums have begun to do just this, the modern exhibition has evolved.

A similar argument is presented in a short paper by Elaine Gurian originally published in 1996 as a plea for museums to become more civically responsible by understanding their spaces as a safe place for strangers to

¹⁷ Douglas Worts, “Measuring Museum Meaning: A Critical Assessment Framework,” *Journal of Museum Education* 31 (2006): pg. 42.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, pg. 42.

congregate and interact.¹⁹ She discusses the idea of institutions of memory and how they contribute to the stability of society. She defines these institutions as ones that store, collect, house, and pass along the past- such as museums, libraries, archives, religious organizations, etc. These institutions of memory are regarded as important to our collective wellbeing, and that they can also purposefully create safe spaces for congregating and, by encouraging the active use of such spaces, foster the rebuilding of community.²⁰

Gurian sees potential in museums as safe spaces for community interaction – a far cry from static display. The relationship between content and visitor does not need to be a direct one, but decisions behind the content must be made on the basis of finding a way to help visitors understand their relationship to it. Only then can this social interaction take place, and they can only take place within a multi-faceted experiential environment.

Thinking about museums in a similar way, in her essay “Museums and Communities”, Hilde Hein builds her discussion of communities and experience in museums on the assertion that although experience is a personal and subjective event, it is inscribed by social conventions and forces, and expressed in communally meaningful forms.²¹ From there she argues that museums as mediators of experience must recognize its social aspect in order to

¹⁹ Elaine Heumann Gurian, “A Savings Bank for the Soul: About Institutions of Memory and Congregant Spaces, 1996,” in *Civilizing the Museum: the Collected Writings of Elaine Heumann Gurian*, edited by Elaine Heumann Gurian, pg. 94.

²⁰ *Ibid*, pg. 90.

²¹ Hilde S Hein, “Museums and Communities” in *The Museum in Transition: A Philosophical Perspective* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), pg. 37.

create successful ones, as well as recognize the vast differential of communities that make up the collective museum audience. She writes that museums intersect with a number of communities – many of which are alive and reactive and do not *own* any of them.²²

The idea that museums must recognize the variation of communities that make up their audience is an important one, especially when considering the evolution of the modern exhibition. Using these diverse resources to create exhibition experiences that are enriching on multiple levels is something that has helped museums develop exhibitions that have successfully attracted broad audiences, such as blockbusters.

Although each of these different insights may seem unrelated on the surface, they have all contributed to the development of the modern multi-dimensional exhibition. Blockbusters have evolved directly from this progression, and by gaining an understanding of each of these contributing factors, museums can more effectively evaluate the different experiences potential blockbusters can offer.

Elements Within an Exhibition that Create Visitor Experience

There are multiple ways in which exhibitions create opportunities for visitor experience. Due to the creativity and innovation of contemporary exhibition designers, the attention to detail and purposeful use of space, and

²² *Ibid*, pg. 39.

the validation of these efforts seen through visitor studies, museums are conscientious about these opportunities now more than ever. Elements that create opportunities for experience within an exhibition can include ambient sound, material choices, and general graphic identity.

In his 1991 book *Exhibitions in Museums*, Michael Belcher lays out seven elements that comprise exhibitions: the museum showcase, lighting, color, graphics, models, supplementary exhibition media, and pacing. Showcases, as Belcher describes them, are the physical cases in which objects are placed. He notes that to many visitors these cases are an irritant, creating a physical and psychological barrier between viewer and object, despite fulfilling a number of important purposes.²³ Although the descriptions of lighting and color are fairly self-explanatory, Belcher writes that these are essential because an exhibition is such a visual experience. He refers to graphics as interpretive aids, including labels, text panels, photographs, illustrations, maps and diagrams. As such they play a central role in the visual communication process.²⁴ Models are the representations of objects, and Belcher points out that there are many occasions when their use is appropriate and educationally effective. However, there can be drawbacks, especially the danger of losing the concept of truth that museums have worked hard to establish.²⁵ Supplementary exhibition media refers to the use of media such as audio-visual or sound within the

²³ Michael Belcher, "Exhibition Elements," in *Exhibitions in Museums* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1991), pg. 122.

²⁴ *Ibid*, pg. 134.

²⁵ *Ibid*, pg. 138.

exhibition space. Finally, pacing is an important element in any exhibition, and may be defined as the rate, intensity and variety of stimuli that the visitor will encounter while moving through the space.²⁶

There are opportunities for visitors to create experience within each of these elements. The best way to begin to define general areas of experiential opportunity is to look at general methodologies within exhibitions, and understand that they may be applied to several different elements.

A primary element within exhibitions that creates opportunities for visitors to create unique experiences is a hallmark of modern exhibitions: interactivity. Andrea Witcomb explores three types of interactivity she finds in museums, and evaluates each. The first is ‘technical interactivity’, which is focused solely on using electronic interactives to move visitors through exhibit space. Although valuable information can be gained from this type of interactivity, according to Witcomb it supports a strong linear narrative that prevents any negotiation of meanings.²⁷ The second type is ‘spatial interactivity’, which in many ways is the opposite of technical. In this method, the interactivity is not created by specific interactive elements in the exhibit, but is achieved by the lack of a linear narrative through the space. There is no ‘correct’ or suggested order in which to view the elements of the exhibit, and so the visitors are free to interact with the space however they choose. The third

²⁶ *Ibid*, pg. 145.

²⁷ Andrea Witcomb, “Interactivity in Museums: the Politics of Narrative Style” in *Re-Imagining the Museum: Beyond the Mausoleum* (London: Routledge, 2003), pg. 130.

type she discusses is called ‘dialogic interactivity’, which she suggests offers a middle ground between the first two. It attempts to use the concept of interactivity to create a new space in which meanings can be negotiated, while maintaining an explicit political commitment.²⁸ I understand her use of the term ‘political commitment’ to mean a distinct chronology of narrative. She also claims that the effects of technologies have not entirely displaced objects in museums but rather have brought into question absolute claims about their meaning.²⁹

Witcomb’s article goes far to explain the value of electronic media used in exhibitions. She quotes Marshall McLuhan’s assertion that electronic technologies force interaction by flattening social hierarchies and territorial boundaries through the inclusion of previously separate groups within the one space of communication.³⁰ She then writes that by taking this argument to the museum, it becomes possible to analyze the museum around questions of *articulation*, focusing on how the museum is connected into, and operates through, other channels of communication, and becomes an institution that is closely connected with other sites of cultural representation.³¹ This observation is germane to the development of experience because it speaks to how museums can communicate effectively with their audiences. The museum is in

²⁸ *Ibid*, pg. 130.

²⁹ Andrea Witcomb, “Beyond the Mausoleum: Museums and the Media” in *Re-Imagining the Museum: Beyond the Mausoleum* (London: Routledge, 2003), pg. 104.

³⁰ *Ibid*, pg. 109.

³¹ *Ibid*, pg. 110.

a unique position of being able to marry the potential of virtual communication with the substantive connection to the material world that their collections provide. In doing so, museums can provide unique experiences to their visitors, as this marriage can take place nowhere else.

Continuing the conversation, John Stickler discusses how interactivity allows for a broadened expanse of experiences within exhibition space. He makes astute observations about how the public reacts to interactivity in museums, and how it provides for a more complete immersive experience in the subject matter. It is important to recognize that this type of immersion is essential in creating experience, as well as an exhibition that will be well received by the public.³²

One other specific way to create visitor experience within an exhibition is to provide visitors with the opportunity to leave their own thoughts and feedback behind. In a short 2003 essay, Phaedra Livingstone notes on the importance in museums to allow visitors to write their own experience within exhibition space. She outlines the idea of giving voice, in which visitors are given the opportunity to develop and express their own meaning in an exhibition through a combination of gathering information and sharing it in forum-style exhibit features. She writes that the growing body of empirical research on visitor learning demonstrates the influence of personal interests,

³² John Stickler, "Total Immersion: New Technology Creates New Experiences," *Museum International* (UNESCO, Paris) 47(1): pg. 32.

visit agendas, and interactions with visit companions on learning behavior.³³

She then goes on to say that an exhibition is therefore never simply a self-contained curatorial text, but always an inter-textual experience.³⁴

Models for Understanding

There are many different ways of understanding visitor experience, and trying to categorize it into academic models. The range of ways that scholars have approached this is a testament to its elusive and somewhat ephemeral nature. However, there are several existing models. In an attempt to present a coherent picture of the visitor's total museum experience, John Falk and Lynn Dierking created a framework for making sense of both the common strands and unique complexities of the museum experience. Described in their book *The Museum Experience*, it is called the "Interactive Experience" model.³⁵ Given the multiplicity of visitor and museum types, trying to understand why visitors go to museums, what they do there, and what they will remember is a significant challenge. Falk and Dierking approached this effort from a visitor's perspective, and conceptualized the museum visit as involving an interaction among three contexts: 1) the personal context, 2) the social context and 3) the physical context.³⁶ The personal context includes the visitor's interests,

³³ Phaedra Livingstone, "The Voices in your Head: Meaning-Making and Intertextuality in Visitor Experiences of A Question of Truth," *Journal of Museum Education* 28 (2003), Pg. 13.

³⁴ *Ibid*, pg. 13.

³⁵ John Falk and Lynn Dierking, "Introduction: the Interactive Experience Model" in *The Museum Experience* (Washington: Whalesback Books, 1992), 1.

³⁶ *Ibid*, pg. 2.

motivations, and concerns. Understanding the social context of a museum visit³⁷ allows us to make sense of variations in behavior between, for example adults and children in family groups. The physical context includes the architecture and ‘feel’ of the building, as well as the objects and artifacts contained within. How visitors behave, what they observe, and what they remember are strongly influenced by the physical context. The visitor continuously constructs each of the contexts, and the interactions of these create the experience.³⁸

The model can be visualized as a three-dimensional set of three interacting spheres, each representing one of the three contexts. At any given moment, the visitor focuses on a particular object, individual, or thought, or several of these simultaneously. The model predicts that a visitor’s experience can best be understood by looking, over time, at the series of critical intersections of the three contexts.³⁹

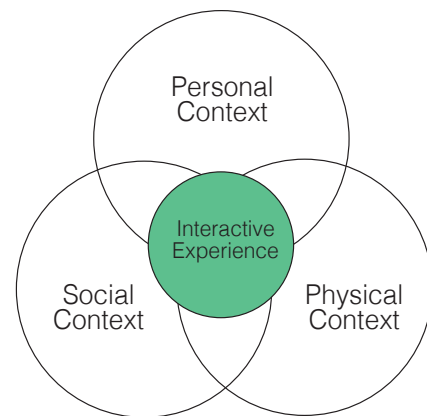


Fig. 4: Falk and Dierking Interactive Experience Model.

Independent exhibition consultant

and former Director of Exhibit at the New York Hall of Science Ted Ansbacher

³⁷ Falk and Dierking argue that all museum experiences inevitably have a social context. Most visitors attend museums in groups, and even those that do not have interactions with staff and other visitors within the exhibition space.

³⁸ *Ibid*, pg. 4.

³⁹ *Ibid*, pg. 6.

explores experience-based learning in museums, and has constructed a different model describing how visitors experiential interaction creates understanding. The model starts, he writes, with the assumption that our ‘universe’ can be divided into two realms: the physical world where objects exist and events happen, and our minds, which are capable of memory and conscious thought. What we see, hear, touch, taste, smell, and do – the interface between the physical world and the mind – is called direct experience. It is through this direct experience that we develop understanding. The interplay between the two is an ongoing process Ansbacher calls the inquiry cycle.

Although Ansbacher's model is concerned with experience as a conduit

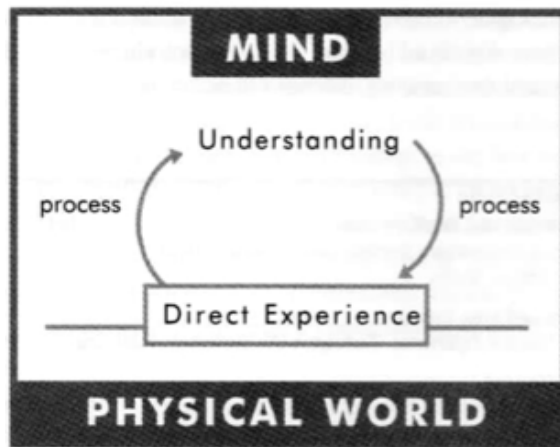


Fig. 5: Ted Ansbacher's Inquiry Cycle Model.

for learning, it should still be considered one that addresses visitor experience within exhibitions. The inquiry cycle in this case could be considered the interplay between existing knowledge and understanding of the exhibitions' theme (the mind),

and the objects and other elements within the space (the physical world). The result is the experience prompted by the exhibition.

Another perspective on the understanding of visitor experience is that of Zahava Doering, a senior social scientist at the Smithsonian. In a paper presented at arts management conference in 1999, she divides types of visitor experience into four distinct categories: Social, Object, Cognitive, or Introspective. As she describes them, *Social experiences* center on one or more other people, besides the visitor; *Object experiences* give prominence to the artifact or the "real thing"; *Cognitive experiences* emphasize the interpretive or intellectual aspects of the experience; *Introspective experiences* focus on the visitor's personal reflections, usually triggered by an object or a setting in the museum.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Zahava Doering, "Strangers, Guests or Clients: Visitor Experiences in Museums" presented at *Managing the Arts: Performance, Financing, Service*, Weimar, Germany, March 17 – 19, 1999, pg. ii.

Social experiences

Spending time with friends/family/other people
Seeing my children learning new things

Object experiences

Being moved by beauty
Seeing rare/uncommon/valuable things

Cognitive experiences

Enriching my understanding
Gaining information or knowledge
Reflecting on the meaning of what I was looking at

Introspective experiences

Feeling a spiritual connection
Imagining other times or places
Thinking what it would be like to own such things
Recalling my travels/childhood experiences/ other memories
Feeling a sense of belonging

Fig. 6: Zahava Doering's Visitor Experience Model.

Doering's work also relates to Ansbacher's theory of the experience-based inquiry cycle, as she asserts that individuals come to museums with different entrance narratives, and with different perspectives and approaches to the experience. Her conception of the entrance narrative – or internal story line that visitors have before they enter – has three distinct components: a basic framework (i.e., the fundamental way that individuals construe and contemplate the world), information about the given topic (organized according to that basic framework), and personal experiences, emotions and memories that verify and

support this understanding.⁴¹ This model suggests that the most satisfying exhibitions for visitors will be those that resonate with their entrance narrative and confirm and enrich their existing view of the world.⁴² Doering's point here is one that is particularly important when considering the types of experiences offered within feature exhibitions. Visitors are diverse in their interests and are looking for different types of experiences in museums. If museums want to be truly accountable to their clients, they should equally respect and consider as valid the different types of visitor experience.⁴³

The recognition of pre-existing knowledge or entrance narrative as a critical factor to consider when trying to understand visitor experience within a museum is the principal foundation of a more recent academic model: identity-based experience. The concept behind the identity model is that the distinct demographic and psychographic motivations that prompt visitors to attend museums can be identified, and visitors can thus be divided into identity groups. Once the museum understands the identities of their visitors, they can work to create experiences that will appeal to each of them individually.

As John Falk puts it, accurately understanding the museum visitor's experience requires expanding the time frame of investigation so that it includes aspects of the visitor's life both before and after their museum visit.⁴⁴

⁴¹*Ibid*, pg. 8.

⁴² *Ibid*, pg. 8.

⁴³ *Ibid*, pg. 12.

⁴⁴ John Falk, "Reconceptualizing the Museum Visitor Experience: Who Visits, Why, and to What Affect?" (Paper presented at the annual meeting for ICOM, Taipei, Taiwan, October 22-27, 2011).

Although not necessarily dealing directly with the creation of experience within exhibition space, this type of model should be referenced in tandem with a more action-centric model such as Interactive Experience. In so doing, scholars can gain a deeper level of understanding of the visitors themselves and the experiences they are likely to have within an exhibition. Furthermore, especially in the case of feature exhibitions, they can strategically develop the show's content to provide these experiences.

One example of an identity model is the one put forth by Falk in his 2011 International Council of Museums' Committee for Museology Conference keynote paper. The categories he has chosen to identify visitors are Explorers, Facilitators, Professional/Hobbyists, Experience Seekers, Rechargers, Respectful Pilgrims, and Affinity Seekers. In a similar study undertaken to better understand visitors to the Dallas Art Museum, Bonnie Pittman and Ellen Hirzy came to a similar conclusion about visitor identities and how they influence visitors' experiences within the museum. Their results categorized visitors into one of four psychographic clusters: observers, participants, independents and enthusiasts.⁴⁵ Although clearly less extensive than Falk's, the DAM study is another good example of an identity model.

Where the Field is Going

⁴⁵ Bonnie Pittman and Ellen Hirzy, *Igniting the Power of Art: Advancing Visitor Engagement in Museums* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

Recognizing that the drivers behind museum experience extend beyond the building's four walls is an important and prevalent principle in current literature on the subject. However, although the field recognizes that outside influences like Doering's entrance narratives have a definite effect on the type of experience the visitor will have, it is important to remember that the experience itself is still product of their physical presence in and interaction with the space. What host institutions must understand about the potential for success of their blockbuster exhibitions in terms of visitor experience is that there must be something for everyone therein. Museums can certainly use different models of understanding to determine how they want to focus their efforts towards visitors, but the important takeaways from this section of the study are these: recognizing the importance of visitor experience for the success of exhibitions, understanding how the needs of visitors are continuously influencing the design and development of exhibitions, and that visitors have unique ways of creating and responding to experience within exhibitions.

Chapter III: Combating the Blockbuster Controversy

Over the past 30 years, few topics within the museum community have been given as much attention, or debated as hotly as blockbuster exhibitions. Many non-art museums are reluctant to invest in large-scale blockbusters, and there are several very important reasons why. Namely, that blockbusters can stray from mission, lack significant interpretive content, and can be perceived as too commercial. The fact remains, however, that when a show is successful it can bolster attendance, and draw visitors from a wider audience than would generally be interested in spending leisure time in a museum.

Simply by virtue of that fact, the blockbuster is essentially a good thing. As Stephen Weil points out, museums are facing a shift in priorities that is focusing attention on the needs of the visitor, and this entails broadening the visitor base. Although they should by no means be the primary approach to broadening the base, entertaining exhibitions with widespread appeal are an excellent tool for reaching greater numbers of new people. How, then, can museums combat the criticisms and mount blockbusters that reach these lofty goals? The answers are certainly not absolute, but by understanding the bases for each and how they can potentially be addressed, museums can move one step closer.

Mission Drift

One of the most interesting things to note when beginning a discussion about blockbusters is the glaring lack of related scholarship that addresses non-art shows. In museum academia the term blockbuster is overwhelmingly acknowledged to be and studied as the survey style, big name canonical art exhibition. Tom Csaszar's 1997 journal article entitled "The Spectacular, Record-Breaking, Sold Out Smash Hit Blockbuster Supershow!: A Phenomenon of Museum Culture"⁴⁶ dealt exclusively with art exhibitions. Furthermore, it did not even acknowledge the existence of non-art blockbusters. The same is true of a chapter in Emma Barker's 1999 book *Contemporary Cultures of Display* entitled "Exhibiting the Canon: the Blockbuster Show"⁴⁷, and Alan Wallach's 2002 article "Class Rites in the Age of the Blockbuster"⁴⁸.

The term blockbuster gets a similar art-heavy treatment in print media. Articles entitled "Blockbusters: too big to fail?"⁴⁹, "In Praise of Blockbusters"⁵⁰, and the aptly named "To Blockbuster or Not to Blockbuster"⁵¹ all fail to make any mention of non-art blockbusters. Granted, in some cases articles with titles like these are published in art-focused magazines, but the lack of any sort of

⁴⁶ Tom Csaszar, "The Spectacular, Record-Breaking, Sold Out Smash Hit Blockbuster Supershow!: A Phenomenon of Museum Culture," *New Art Examiner* 24 (1996/1997): 22–27.

⁴⁷ Emma Barker, "Exhibiting the Canon: the Blockbuster Show," in *Contemporary Cultures of Display* (London: Yale University Press, 1999), 127–146.

⁴⁸ Alan Wallach, "Class Rites in the Age of the Blockbuster," in *High Pop: Making Culture into Popular Entertainment*, ed. Jim Collins (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 114–128.

⁴⁹ Giles Waterfield, "Blockbusters: too big to fail?," *The Art Newspaper*, May 19, 2011.

⁵⁰ Richard Lacayo, "In Praise of Blockbusters," *Time Magazine*, September 17, 2009.

⁵¹ Emily Bauman, "To Blockbuster or Not To Blockbuster," *F News Magazine*, April 6, 2009.

distinction is still notable. Although this may seem somewhat trivial, it is actually representational of one of the most significant challenges facing non-art museums today when considering whether or not to invest in a blockbuster: there are simply not that many options to choose from that may fit into the scope of the institution's mission. This is not to say that there is a black and white distinction between art and non-art blockbusters. After all, the first iteration of *King Tut* was promoted as an art exhibition. There are also plenty of contemporary examples that blur the line. The Metropolitan Museum of Art's 2011 retrospective on the work of late fashion designer Alexander McQueen is an excellent example of a bona-fide blockbuster that fit nicely into the artistic, historic, and cultural categories.⁵² Nonetheless, the lack of selection of perfectly relevant blockbusters remains a problem for non-art museums. This, these institutions are often forced to choose between hosting a potentially successful and highly beneficial blockbuster, and avoiding the critics who come armed with those two dreaded words: mission drift.

When asked how she felt about mission drift in feature exhibitions in an interview for this thesis, Vice President of Exhibitions at the National Constitution Center Stephanie Reyer pointed out that in her current position she realized the need to relax her stance on the subject a bit. Coming from a background in science museum exhibition design, Reyer noted that there was a

⁵² This study focused only on non-art exhibitions, but it is important to note that the data may apply to art blockbusters as well. Furthermore, insights gained from the study of art-based blockbusters can also be insightful and informative for the non-art sector.

bit more leeway and room for interpretation as to what topics the mission could encompass. In a museum with a specificity of mission as narrow as the NCC, the options for feature exhibitions that adhere strictly to mission and still have the potential to draw big crowds dwindle even further.

As Stephen Weil notes, when collections were at the center of museums' focus, disciplinary exclusivity might have made sense. With the refocus of the museum on its public-service function, however, strong arguments can be advanced for releasing the museum from the disciplinary straitjacket.⁵³ Non-art museums should not be afraid to embrace blockbusters that may fall slightly outside their scope if a compelling case can be made that the exhibition's presence within that institution benefits the public. When considering hosting a blockbuster that threatens mission drift, it is also important for museums to consider that their ability to benefit the public reaches beyond their mission. When the Franklin Institute hosted the modern iteration of *King Tut* in 2007, it certainly approached the mission drift line. However, as Stephen Snyder pointed out, the Franklin was the only institution in Philadelphia at the time that was capable of housing the exhibition. Had they turned it down, the show would have travelled to New York or Washington, DC, and the entire region would have lost out both culturally and economically. Although *Tut* is

⁵³ Stephen E. Weil, "From Being *about* Something to Being *for* Somebody: The Ongoing Transformation of the American Museum," in *Making Museums Matter* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), 42.

something of an extreme case because of its unprecedented popularity, the argument is still a valid and important one.

That said, non-art museums do not always have to face an ultimatum when it comes to blockbusters and mission drift. In certain cases, museums can combat mission drift by altering a show's content to better suit their institutional mission. Although this can require a significant allocation of resources, it can help allay potential backlash. Once again, the National Constitution Center provides a good example. Many critics charged them with shameless mission drift in favor of turning a profit when they hosted a retrospective exhibition about the life and music of Bruce Springsteen entitled *From Asbury Park to the Promised Land*. These critics, however, leveled their accusations at the NCC without really taking pause to evaluate the exhibition's content. The original iteration of the Springsteen show was developed by the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland, and focused primarily on the artists' music and his life as a musician. When the NCC took it on, however, they re-tooled much of the interpretive content and the physical design in order to present Springsteen's life and work through an American-historical lens. Praise for his songs as excellent contributions to the history of rock and roll became an examination of freedom of expression and speech through popular music. Although admittedly not directly related to the US

constitution, the Springsteen exhibit dealt with general ideas about Americana and the way Americans choose to express themselves in a fun and vibrant way.

The mission drift controversy will most likely remain a point of contention for non-art museums in the years to come. But, with a measured examination of the benefits and drawbacks, and an open-minded approach to interpretation, it does not have to constitute a line in the sand.

The Content Critique

One particularly harsh criticism of blockbuster exhibitions is that they tend to play to the lowest common denominator in terms of the quality of their interpretive content. Often, they are seen as having little to no interpretive content that moves the field forward. Rather, they are criticized as exhibitions that have wide appeal, but little can be found within to challenge the visitor. This is the sister issue to mission drift, and as such it can be addressed in a similar way.

The truth is that a critic cannot really judge the value of an exhibition until they have examined and experienced the content. Just because it is a 'pop culture' exhibition does not necessarily mean that the content is nothing more than bubble gum. One example of an exhibition that is capitalizing on a popular culture theme, but has legitimate academic background for content is that of the Indiana Jones exhibition currently in development by the design

firm X3, with object contributions from the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

The easiest and most straightforward way to deal with the content critique is to ensure that blockbusters feature content that is up to snuff, so to speak. This responsibility falls squarely on the shoulders of exhibition developers, designers, and decision-makers working currently in the field. Although some topics lend themselves to superficial content, museum professionals must work hard to ensure that exhibitions that go this route are the exception rather than the rule. In some ways this can be an uphill battle, but it is important that this discussion within hosting institutions happens, and that it is a frank and honest one. Again, allotting the resources to bring existing content up to par can be taxing, and in many cases not an option at all. However, in many respects this is the blockbuster critique that museums have the most control over. Furthermore, as discussed later in this study, blockbusters are actually *more* likely to succeed if they feature forward-thinking content.

Another facet to the content critique is that the lack of significant content renders blockbusters generally superficial, and therefore unable to have a lasting influential effect on their visitors. Obviously, improvement in content is again the best way to combat this. The criticism itself, however, is not entirely fair. Tom Hennes mentioned in a recent interview conducted for

this thesis that blockbuster exhibitions are very rarely transformative. That is to say that although they may draw large audiences, they do not contain the type or quality of experiences that have the potential to continue to affect visitors after their visits the way permanent installations do. The case can be made, however, that certain blockbusters – namely the ones that live up to that distinction – can provide continually transformative experiences for their visitors.

When a visitor can have first-hand contact with a famous artifact or collection that they have heard of or studied, but never believed they would have the chance to see, is that not a transformative experience? At the very least it is one that they will remember and continually revisit. Furthermore, blockbusters have the power to continue to influence their visitors long after they have left the museum because they deal with topics that are more likely to be discussed in their everyday lives. Once a visitor has seen the travelling *Titanic* exhibition, for example, they will likely remember that experience every time the Titanic comes up. Whether it be within a conversation about the sinking, the film, or even a discussion about cruise ship safety, that visitor will remember their experience within the exhibition. Consequently, they probably have a deeper insight and understanding to contribute to the conversation than they otherwise might have had.

It is a mistake to dismiss blockbusters as throwaway experiences for visitors that are only good for a temporary high. That approach makes it too easy to accept superficial content, and perpetuate the problem. These exhibitions should be recognized as legitimate museum experiences for their visitors, and treated as such from development to delivery. Visitors themselves certainly believe them to be, as they are often willing to pay a premium to take part.

Over-Commercialization

A logical follow-on from the content criticism is that blockbusters can be too commercial. Many critics accuse museums of being more concerned about the till in their gift shops than the learning of their visitors. As Carol Duncan writes in her article “Museums and Department Stores: Close Encounters”:

With their crowds of noisy visitors, big advertising budgets, and ever-growing retail departments – not to mention their growing dependence on corporate sponsorship – these institutions look more like a part *of* the business world than a realm apart from it. Museum stores, once small shops or even single counters selling postcards and a few publications, have grown into superstores, complete with franchised outlets and websites that do millions of dollars in sales. When does a special exhibition *not* conclude with a boutique full of ties, teapots, or other merchandise copied from or reminiscent of something in the show?⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Carol Duncan, “Museums and Department Stores: Close Encounters,” in *High Pop: Making Culture into Popular Entertainment*, ed. Jim Collins (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 129.

Duncan does not necessarily condemn blockbusters in the remainder of her article, but her points here are fair enough. However, in many ways the commercialization of exhibitions, primarily in the realm of corporate sponsorship, has enabled blockbusters to come into being, and therefore reach their broader audiences. As Tom Csaszar puts it, in the blockbuster phenomenon, the aristocratic patron has returned, now in the form of corporate sponsorship.⁵⁵ As such, especially considering the current economic climate, it is something of a necessity. Csaszar continues his assessment of sponsorship by writing that rather than criticizing corporate underwriting, it is more important for audiences to be simply aware of this sponsorship and give credit and blame where they are due.⁵⁶ His approach to the issue outlines the primary way that museums can combat commercialization criticism in the area of sponsorship, which is to simply assess the opportunities for it on a case-by-case basis. Each individual institution is in the best possible position to evaluate the pros and cons of corporate sponsorship, but museums should be generally aware of the source of these criticisms in order to give potential sponsorship arrangements an informed assessment.

In terms of the commercialization criticisms leveled at museum gift shops, the truth here is that it is really a matter of individual visitor preference. Some visitors enjoy the themed shopping experiences blockbusters can

⁵⁵ Tom Csaszar, "The Spectacular, Record-Breaking, Sold Out Smash Hit Blockbuster Supershow!: A Phenomenon of Museum Culture," *New Art Examiner* 24 (1996/1997), 24.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, pg. 25.

provide, while others find them distasteful. Here again, the host institution is in the best position to determine the appropriate amount of merchandise featured in retail spaces. The most important way to combat these criticisms, however, is again to ensure that the quality of the content within the exhibition itself is as well crafted as possible. Similarly, the items within the gift shop itself should be commensurately thoughtful and well-crafted. Although there should be items available for a variety of price ranges, the avoidance of kitsch whenever possible should go a long way in allaying the critics.

Conclusion

Although these general critiques can apply to blockbusters across the board, the struggle does not necessarily end there. It is also important to remember that each type of museum must deal with its own criticisms. Museum size, mission, and budget can all play a part in creating specific controversies that must be dealt with on an institutional case-by-case basis. However when dealing with the criticisms, and deciding whether or not to take on a blockbuster, it is important for museums not to lose sight of their power for good. They can reach far wider audiences than traditional exhibitions, and present opportunities to expose unlikely visitors to the museum's *permanent* content as well as the feature. Each of the points outlined here are important to

consider, but they should not influence a museum to shy away from a blockbuster if the time is right.

Chapter IV: Decoding the Blockbuster

In her 1999 examination of the blockbuster exhibition, Emma Barker discusses the origin of the phenomenon as the realization of the power of ‘exhibiting the canon.’⁵⁷ In the piece Barker is referring only to art exhibitions, but the through-lines of her argument are applicable to non-art exhibitions as well. Exhibiting the canon – the point of departure, and tried and true methodology for the blockbuster – involves placing on display for the public those works and artifacts that are successfully representational of an artist, movement, period, or culture. Contemporary non-art blockbusters have also expanded the canon to include collections representational of specific elements within culture – one area of science, one film, or one significant historical figure or event for example.

This is an appropriate and informed place to begin a dissection of the blockbuster, as most successful examples follow this comprehensive representational framework. But in order to understand *why* blockbusters continue to be successful, you must understand to what experiential elements they are actually responding. In so doing, we can identify the working elements within these exhibitions that propel their success, and begin to map out criteria that will give such success a stronger chance of being repeated.

⁵⁷ Emma Barker, “Exhibiting the Canon: the Blockbuster Show,” in *Contemporary Cultures of Display* (London: Yale University Press, 1999), 127.

The research completed for this study indicates that upon this initial analysis, the following elements should be the first iteration of those criteria: *Relatability and Cultural Relevance, Rarity, Reverential Subject Matter, The Icon Artifact, and Voice.*



Fig. 7: Popular experiential elements infographic.

Relatability and Cultural Relevance

In his article “Rethinking the Visitor Experience: Transforming Obstacle into Purpose,” Tom Hennes writes that constructing activity within an

exhibition that will continue to affect the visitor after their departure demands that we find a way to provide visitors with a means of constructing the present experience out of what is already meaningful and important to them.⁵⁸

Although this article deals primarily with permanent exhibitions rather than features, the research for this study concludes overwhelmingly that this is in fact the case for features as well, at least from the perspective of the visitor. As one answer to the survey question of what makes the theme of a feature exhibition interesting enough to prompt attendance read, “Rarity of the objects and content presented, as well as the cultural or scientific significance of the content in general society.” The responses to the first survey question of what motivates attendance to a feature exhibition — comprised of multiple-choice answers, with the option to choose one or more — also show a definitive trend.

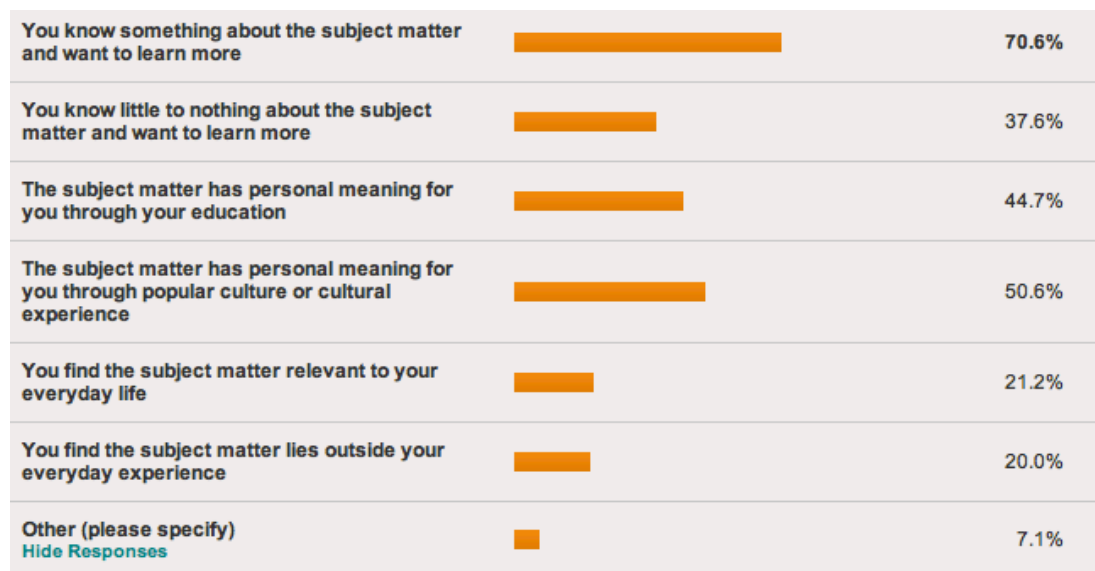


Fig. 8: Survey response: “What motivates you to attend a feature exhibition”? Screen shot courtesy of surveymonkey.com

⁵⁸ Tom Hennes, “Rethinking the Visitor Experience: Turning Obstacle into Purpose,” *Curator* 45 (2002): 109.

The two options chosen most frequently were “you know something about the subject matter and want to know more” with 70.6%, and “the subject matter has personal meaning for you through popular culture or cultural experience” with 50.6%. The next highest ranking was response was “the subject matter has personal meaning for you through your education”, at 44.7%. Respondents were given the opportunity to choose all options that applied to them, so the percentages represent an accurate picture of their preferences. From the first question, the trend of a fondness for exhibition topics with cultural relatability emerges.

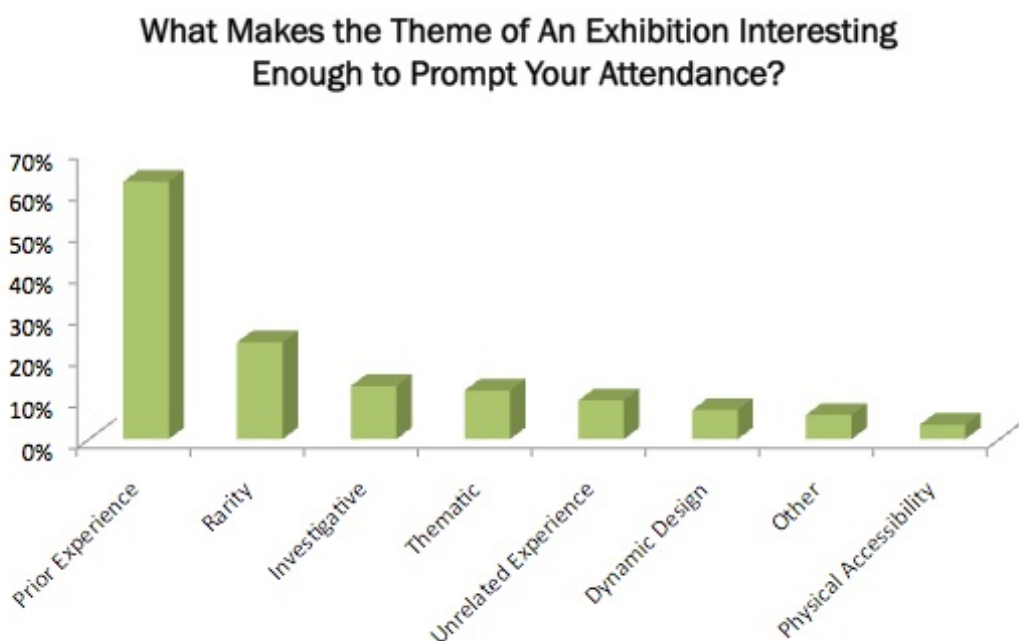


Table 1: Survey Response: “What makes the theme of an exhibition interesting enough to prompt your attendance?”

The above graph represents the coded responses to the second question in the research survey, which was “What makes the theme of an exhibition interesting enough to prompt your attendance?” The code “Prior Experience”

refers to responses that cited historical or cultural significance or an existing interest in the exhibition's topic. 62.4% of survey responses were given this code, showing an undeniable affinity for exhibition topics of cultural relevance. Examples of individual responses are "The subject has significant historical or cultural impact," "Something relevant. Musical. Popular culture," and "Famous in some way (i.e. I have heard about it before on TV or in other media)."

This trend continues in the following graph. Respondents were asked if they had ever attended a blockbuster exhibition, and those who answered yes were asked what about that exhibition(s) made them want to go.⁵⁹

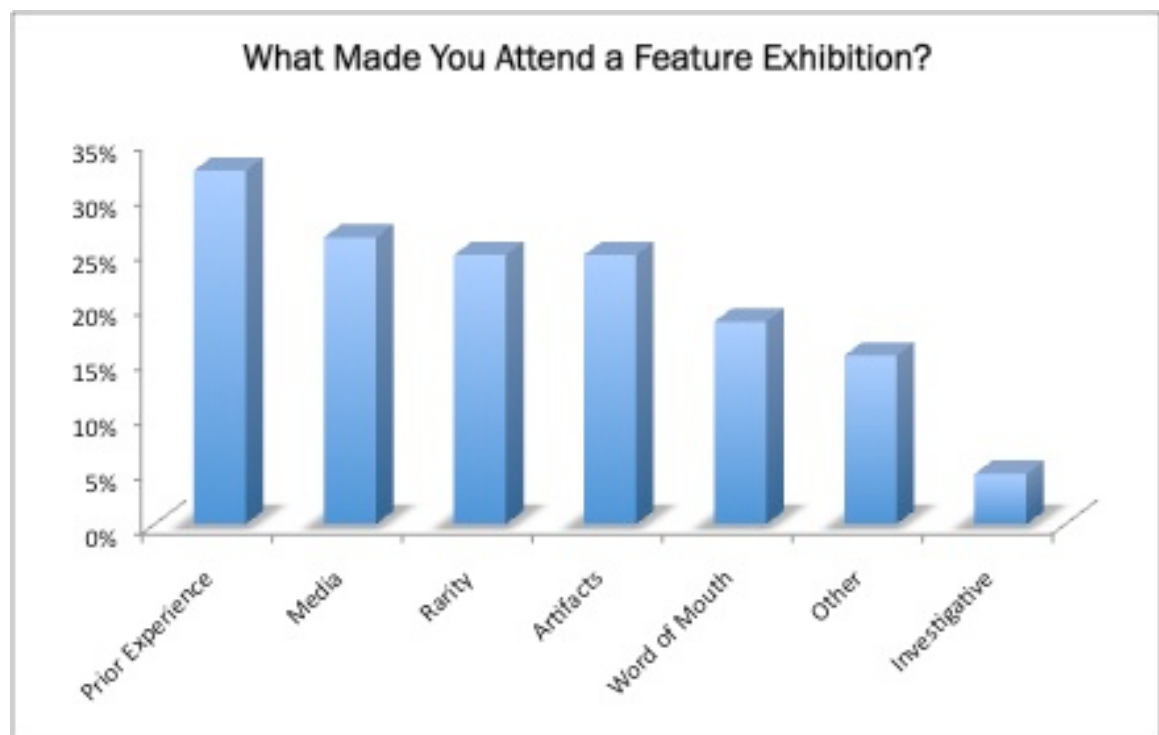


Table 2: Survey Response: "What made you attend a feature exhibition"?

⁵⁹ The code prior experience encapsulated the same response types as in the previous graph.

This argument of the importance of cultural relatability and prior experience with a topic is an easy one to understand and support. The difficulty for museums – especially in the case of feature exhibitions – is determining what the important and meaningful experiences are. Although there is no specific formula to help with this, there is a good amount of scholarship in the field related to it.

The idea of reference of or relatability to popular culture as an aspect of feature exhibitions that contributes to popularity is discussed in Kevin Moore's book *Popular Culture in Museums*. An essay entitled "Sex and Drugs and Rock'N'Roll... and Museums?" Moore asserts that the insurgence of successful popular culture exhibitions in the museum world today is in part due to the movement away from traditional curatorial practices that only shared with the public what institutions and their curators felt the public needed to know, which largely equated with high culture.⁶⁰ Moore also notes that although no real market research has been done about the popularity of popular culture exhibitions, the attendance numbers alone are proof that people are effectively and increasingly drawn in.

Although the relationship between an exhibition's topic and popular culture does not necessarily guarantee larger audiences, it is clear that these types of connections help make exhibitions more accessible to a wider

⁶⁰ Kevin Moore, "Sex and Drugs and Rock'N'Roll... and Museums?", in *Museums and Popular Culture* (London: Cassell, 1997), pg. 85.

population. They also carry with them an all-important factor for visitors spending their leisure time in a museum: they are fun. Museums should not discount the fact that tenets of popular culture have become such because people enjoy them. This is evidenced in reviews that feature such items as highlights. For example, in her review of the *Diana* exhibition at the National Constitution Center, *Philadelphia Examiner* correspondent Debora Toth cites the musical score and handwritten lyrics of Elton John's 1997 rendition of "Candle in the Wind"⁶¹ as one of the show's highlights. According to the Record Industry of America, "Candle in the Wind 1997" is the highest selling chart certified single of all time.⁶² The artifacts were certainly relevant to the exhibition, and were included in a gallery that featured various tributes paid to the princess upon her death. However, they also provided enough of a pop culture tie in that they were fun to see, and thus embraced as a highlight. By allowing the theme of exhibitions to provide these types of opportunities, museums can potentially attract broader audiences. This is because these cultural ideas are consumed on a much larger scale than traditional academic ones, and therefore a greater number of people can relate these subjects to their prior experience.

It is also important to consider that referencing widely understood and recognized cultural themes, patterns, and items—in other words 'popular

⁶¹ "Artist Biography: Elton John", *Rolling Stone Magazine*, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/artists/elton-john/biography>.

⁶² Debora Toth, "Princess Diana Exhibition at Philadelphia's National Constitution Center until December 31, 2009," *Philadelphia Examiner*, October 18, 2009.

culture’ does not refer only to culturally popular media like film or television. Directly related to the misconception that blockbusters must be fluffy and light on their content in order to be appealing, themes that deal with popular culture can similarly extend beyond subjects that are prevalent only in film and television. These outside sources can include books, magazines, and current events as well as historical events or time periods that have captured the public’s imagination and become woven into the fabric of popular culture.

It is also important to note that gone are the days when popular culture and high-brow culture were completely separate spheres. In the introduction to his book *High Pop: Making Culture into Popular Entertainment*, Jim Collins points out that the two have steadily become more intertwined. He writes that:

The popularization of good taste—or more precisely, how to get it—is a manifestation of consumer culture but it is also a complex phenomenon which complicates many of the basic assumptions about how “taste,” whether it be popular or elite, is recognized as such in contemporary cultures... This has led to unprecedented developments in which institutions and tastes which were formerly thought to be mutually exclusive have become commonplace—*good design* chain stores, *blockbuster* museum shows, and *high-concept* literary adaptations.⁶³

Modern popular culture audiences have a wider frame of reference than ever before due to the emergence of new media and information technology. Museums must not make the mistake of selling audiences short in terms of what they may or may not find interesting.

⁶³ Jim Collins, “High-Pop: An Introduction,” in *High Pop: Making Culture into Popular Entertainment*, ed. Jim Collins (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 1.

The word interesting – and all its appearances in the survey responses – is also worth noting when discussing this aspect of the argument. Again, the propensity for members of the museum field to believe popular culture to be unworthy of a place in legitimate exhibition is a self-defeating approach to this all-important idea of wider appeal. The word *interest* itself implies a sense of investigation and stimulation, as well as a drive to learn more and delve deeper into a particular subject.

Although it may be the popular relatability to prior experience that brings visitors in on a larger scale, it is evident that most are stimulated within the exhibition by a deeper exploration of the material. A shallow sweep of the surface, in fact, does not stimulate or satisfy.⁶⁴ As such, rather than worrying about whether they are ‘dumbing themselves down’ by mounting an exhibit on a topic that may seem un-academic, museums should focus on how to draw the academic value out of that content. It will help alleviate criticism, but more importantly, it will actually deliver for visitors what they want. Movies can reach a mass audience, but the only reason a museum exhibition about that movie will draw people in is that at the very basic level they want to learn more.

If museums are concerned about the ‘dumbing down’ criticism often lodged at popular culture-based exhibitions, they should take comfort that a majority of people surveyed responded that voice within the exhibition was very

⁶⁴ Although there are blockbusters that have done this and still been successful, this study contends that they are the exception rather than the rule. This is also an important way to help move the content quality of blockbusters forward.

important to them. The written content of the exhibition, the interpretation of the subject, and new ways to look at and understand relatively familiar topics are all elements that visitors look for. As one respondent wrote, “Besides the theme of interest, one key to making any exhibition extraordinary is relating to the audience. It is important to have an organized exhibition that seems to progress and evolve. Also, a clear and well-described content is very important because it adds value and relevance to the object in question, which in turn maintains the interest of the audience.”⁶⁵

The consistent reference of relation to visitors’ prior interests as the primary source of engagement also explains the widespread success and popularity of blockbusters when examined in consideration with recently developed identity-based visitor experience models. Because these themes have a wider base of visitors who have prior experience and are familiar with them, it follows logically that these shows will have wider appeal to all of the basic visitor identities, and thus prompt higher attendance figures. Granted, familiarity with a topic will not necessarily guarantee that more people will attend, as there are many other factors to consider. However, it is clear that a culturally popular topic has a better chance of drawing more visitors because of widespread familiarity.

A follow-on to the thoughts concerning the importance of cultural relevance and relatability in successful blockbusters is that there are several

⁶⁵ The importance of interpretive voice as a contributing factor to popularity is expanded upon in its own section.

other ways museums might take further advantage of its popularity with visitors. One way is to extend the idea of cultural relatability from the subject matter into the actual contextual interpretation of the exhibition. One survey respondent wrote that although they enjoyed the *King Tut* exhibition, they would have liked greater context for the artifacts: "...the Tut artifacts were fabulous, but I would have liked much more information - how was this made? Who made it? Why?" The draw for this particular visitor is not just the fact that they are interested in a certain topic, but that they are interested in the intricacies of the human stories behind it. The opportunity for creating relatability in this case comes from interpreting objects in a way that shows the human connections across civilizations and great expanses of time. How did people deal with the problems we face today in their world? Or, as the survey pointed out, how were these foreign objects made and why?

Rarity

One important factor to consider when attempting to schedule or develop a blockbuster exhibition is how much potential the theme has for providing visitors with a rare or 'must-see' experience. The distinction between rarity as defined by the physical scarcity of objects and that of a must-see experience is an important one to note. They will each be discussed further, but both types have equal importance and bearing in this study.

After relevance to their own personal experience, rarity was the second most cited reason amongst survey respondents that an exhibition's theme would prompt their attendance, coming up in 23.5% of responses. A few individual responses mentioning this say "the opportunity to see or experience something of interest, that I might otherwise miss," "Something that has a finite limited time to see. Rarity or newness," and "a chance to see objects that are not normally available." Although the importance of rarity to visitors is clear and will be examined further, the percentage drop off from prior experience to rarity in this question is certainly notable. It begs the question of why this occurred, and what the implications are for how museums should focus their strategy and prioritize these criteria. Those decisions, however, must be made at the institutional level based on the goals and objectives of each individual exhibition. In the initial iteration of this data no general priority is assigned, simply because accurately determining that type of ranking is outside the scope of this study.

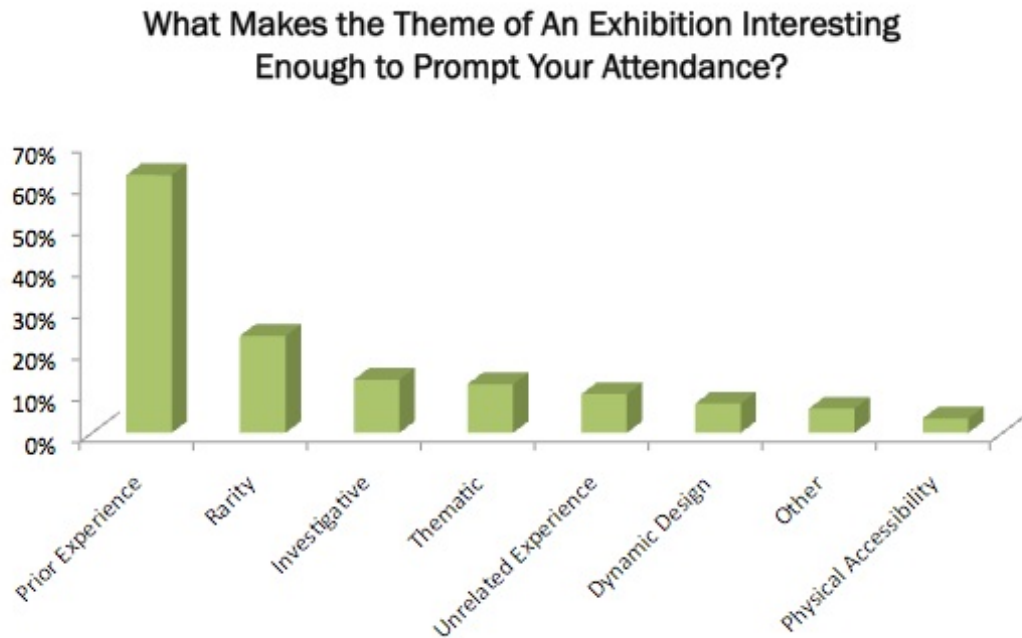


Table 3: Survey Response: What makes the theme of an exhibition interesting enough to prompt your attendance?”

Aside from the clear indication that rarity is one of the elements that would prompt attendance to a show, many survey respondents also cited it as one of the main components of their free response answers to other questions. For example, in response to the question of what makes a feature exhibition extraordinary, one answer reads “Something so unique that I don't think I'll ever see anything like it again, and I tell everyone I know they must see it.”⁶⁶ Furthermore, of 77.6% of respondents who said they had attended a blockbuster exhibition, 24.6 % cited the rarity that was offered them as one of the reasons they went.

⁶⁶ Survey response.

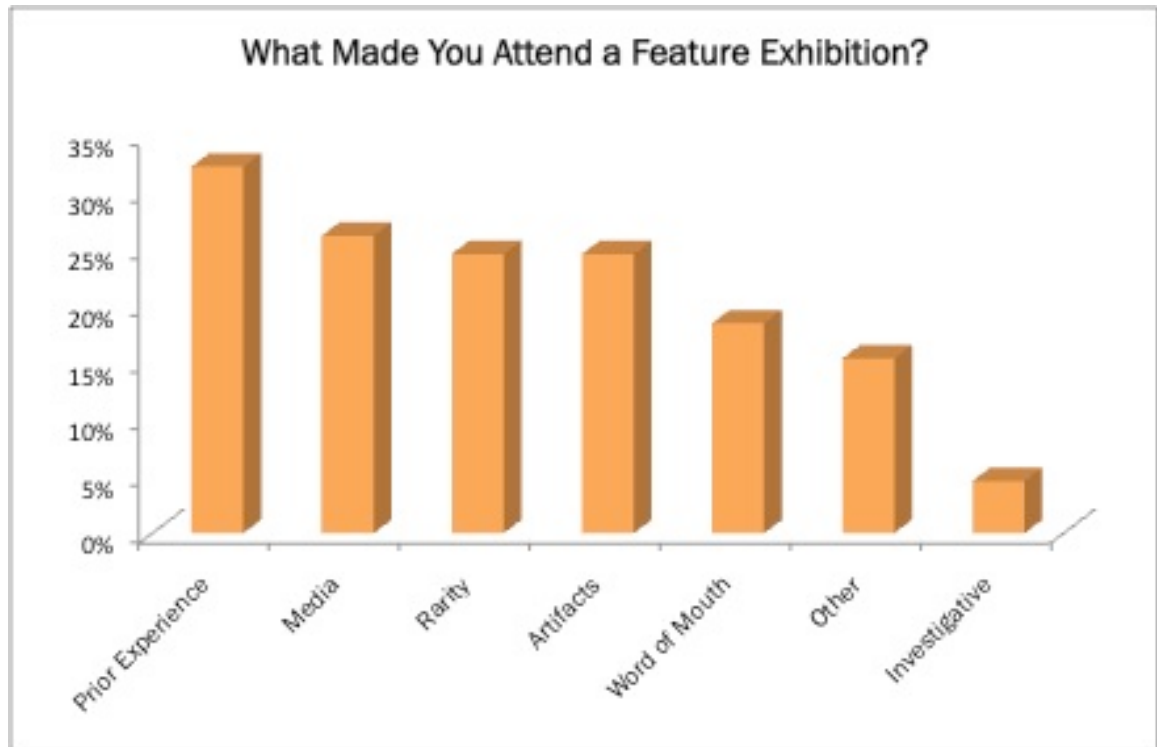


Table 4: Survey Response: "What made you attend a feature exhibition"?

Current professional opinion certainly corroborates this data. In conversations with Tom Hennes, Stephanie Reyer, and VP of Exhibitions at the Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology Kate Quinn, they each emphasized the necessity for rarity as a central element of a successful feature exhibition. Although they made slightly different points, at the core they all said the same thing: that visitors are drawn to feature exhibitions that provide them an opportunity to see things that they otherwise may not have had the chance to see. Whether these objects are ancient Chinese mummies seen for the first time outside of China at the Penn Museum's *Secrets of the Silk Road* exhibition, King Tut's sarcophagus or Princess Diana's wedding dress, the

overwhelming consensus is that if you bring it, they will come. Or at least they will be more likely to come.

It is also important to consider that this element of rarity does not necessarily have to come from the objects themselves. There are two distinct types of rarity in exhibitions. The first, of course, is that of the objects themselves, logically deemed *object rarity*. The second type is created by the small likelihood that visitors will have a chance to see a show's collection of objects in one place or exhibited a certain way again. This is *collection rarity*.

One example of this that Emma Barker cites is that of a survey exhibition of paintings by Vermeer mounted at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. in 1995.⁶⁷ Although exhibitions on Vermeer were not necessarily a rarity, this particular show included around two-thirds of a surviving output of only just over 30 paintings. A comparable number of Vermeers had not been seen together since 1696 when 21 of them were sold at auction.⁶⁸ In this case, the opportunity to see these pieces assembled as one collection was certainly justified in its hype as a 'once-in-a-lifetime' experience. The same was true for the 2011 exhibition *Infinite Variety: Three Centuries of Red and White Quilts*, created by Thinc Design. As Thinc owner Hennes noted in a conversation for this thesis, a seemingly benign subject like quilts was able to draw huge crowds

⁶⁷ Although this example is of an art exhibition, the nature of its collection and display is relevant to a discussion concerning non-art exhibitions.

⁶⁸ Emma Barker, "Exhibiting the Canon: the Blockbuster Show," in *Contemporary Cultures of Display* (London: Yale University Press, 1999), 135.

because of the opportunity to see these visually stunning works displayed together in one place.

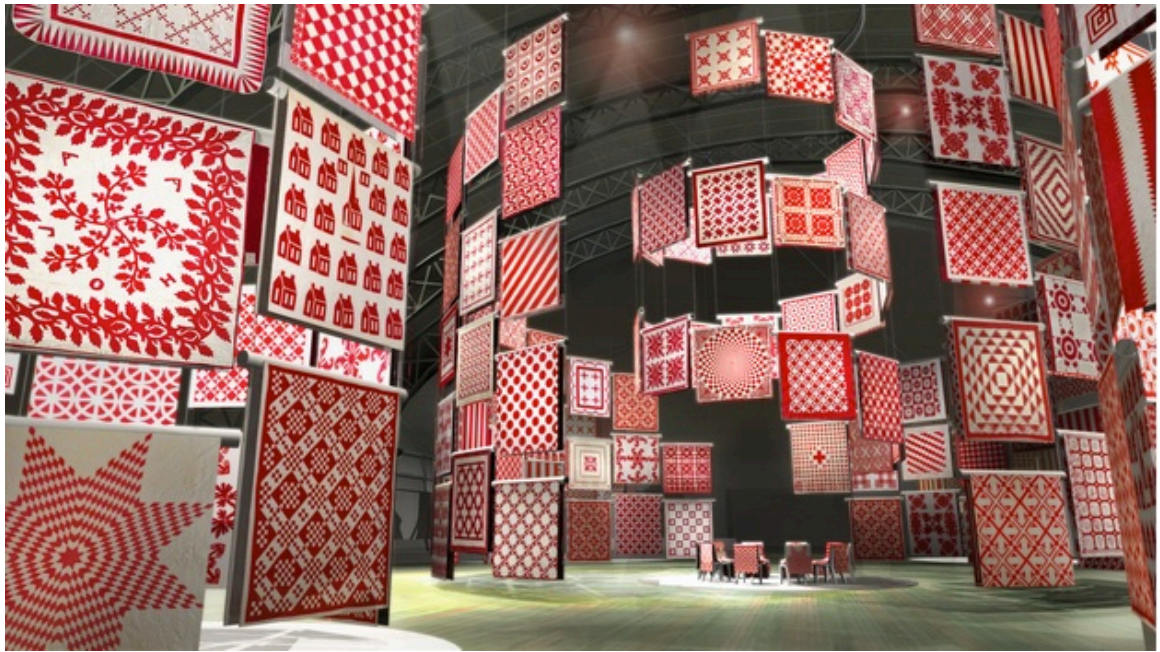


Fig. 9: *Infinite Variety: Three Centuries of Red and White Quilts*, displayed in New York's Park Avenue Armory in 2011. Photo courtesy of National Geographic.

The *Day in Pompeii* blockbuster hosted by the Cincinnati Museum Center is another excellent example of a non-art exhibition that was able to provide this type of collection rarity for its visitors. As a review in *The Columbus Dispatch* stated, seeing some of the artifacts discovered at Pompeii is a rare treat, at least outside of Italy. The 250 objects on display in the Cincinnati exhibit offer “a true snapshot in time,” said Doug McDonald, president of the Museum Center, the show’s only stop in the Midwest.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Steve Stephens, “Exhibit on view for limited time in Cincinnati examines destruction of Pompeii”, *The Columbus Dispatch*, March 18, 2012.



Fig. 10: A plaster cast of bodies found in the destruction of Pompeii at the *Day in Pompeii* exhibition at the Cincinnati Museum Center. Photo courtesy of the *Columbus Dispatch*.

To this point, several survey respondents also directly cited the limited run of a show as a reason that propelled their visit. Granted, a blockbuster exhibition by definition is only available to the public at each institution for a limited time, but it is still valuable for museums to recognize that this is a considerable motive for visitation. The likelihood of an exhibition returning to the host institution's area of the country is another important consideration, and absolutely an example of the rarity visitors are looking for.

Reverential Subject Matter

In a recent conversation with Tom Hennes, he identified the reverence surrounding the topic of an exhibition as a potential driver for popularity. This

element of reverence allows visitors to be brought into the presence of materials and ambience that represent a subject matter that has been elevated to a somewhat mythical status in our culture. *Diana* and *Benjamin Franklin* at the Constitution Center are excellent examples of this. Through the passing of time and the history and circumstances surrounding them, both figures have arguably passed into the status of contemporary cultural legends. Other examples of blockbusters propelled by this sense of reverence are ones that Tom Hennes mentioned – *Titanic: The Artifact Exhibition* and *Body Worlds*, both shown at the Franklin Institute. In *Titanic's* case, there is a similar sense of legendary cultural significance as well as an air of solemnity and respect surrounding the tragedy that brings the truth of our mortality into sharp focus.⁷⁰

In a description of *Titanic: The Artifact Exhibition* at the Franklin⁷¹ for the Philadelphia Inquirer during its run in 2004, Kathy Boccella writes:

It's been nearly 20 years since the iron soul of one of the greatest shipwrecks was discovered 2 1/2 miles beneath the Atlantic. Since then, nearly 6,000 artifacts have been salvaged or stolen from the liner, from the ship's china to part of its hull. RMS Titanic, the salvage company that holds the rights to the wreck and has retrieved 2,200 pieces of it, created the exhibition 10 years ago. It's been seen by 14 million people around the world.

The show tells the ship's tale with pictures, snippets of letters, and artifacts, from its inception to life on board to the sinking that took 1,513 lives.

Reminders of those lives are everywhere: a pair of glasses, a lady's evening bag, a gentleman's bowler, a steamer trunk, pieces of letters that

⁷⁰ Not to mention that the event inspired one of the most famous films of all time.

never made it to their destinations. These personal items make the stories come alive.⁷²

The language Boccella uses – the ship’s “iron soul”, “the sinking that took 1,513 lives” – invokes this sense of reverence for the tragic event. It speaks to the general feelings of awe, wonder, and introspection that these types of exhibitions instill.

The show returned to the Franklin in 2012. Quoted in an article for *The Morning Call* newspaper, Steven Snyder said, "It still ranks as one of our all-time most popular traveling exhibits and is one of the reasons why we've been working to bring it back. We've had countless requests from visitors who wanted to see it again."⁷³ This time around, the exhibition includes 100 artifacts that haven't been displayed in Philadelphia previously. Among them are a ship's whistle, a cherub from the grand staircase, various personal passenger belongings, and a 3D video of a recent dive to the wreck. This new iteration also builds on the experiential element of reverence within the space, involving visitors personally. As Diane Stoneback of *The Morning Call* describes it:

Nineteen Titanic passengers with ties to the city are remembered in a new way in this updated exhibit. Their names have been added to a roster of 161 boarding passes visitors can receive, such as my boarding pass for Mrs. Hansen.

⁷² Kathy Boccella, “Life and Death on the Titanic The exhibition at the Franklin Institute re-creates the majesty and tragedy of the great ocean liner,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 6, 2004.

⁷³ Diane Stoneback, “Philadelphia's Franklin Institute hosts 'Titanic, The Artifact Exhibition' for the second time,” *The Morning Call*, November 14, 2012.

Visitors will not find out if their passenger lived or died until they reach the end of their journey. They'll have to search for the passenger's name in the Memorial Wall to learn their fate.⁷⁴



Fig. 11: Visitor holds recreation Titanic boarding pass at the Franklin Institute in 2012. Photo courtesy of the Franklin Institute.

The idea that people are drawn to these types of experiences is certainly not a new one. It is, in fact, perhaps one of the oldest tenets of human civilization. The crucial difference in our contemporary culture, however, is that museums are in a unique position — outside of religious organizations — to provide that experience with a universally accepted air of legitimacy. As Allison Griffiths points out in her 2008 book *Shivers Down Your Spine: Cinema, Museums, and the Immersive View*, museums have begun to pass into the realm of hallowed ground.

Understanding the powerful influence of the reverential gaze begins to explain ‘pilgrimage’ museum experiences, such as travelling to see the Mona

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

Lisa at the Louvre or the United States' founding documents at the National Archives in person. It also sheds light on the consistent appeal of the broad concepts that most museums recognize as universally engaging: mystery, secrecy, and the 'truth revealed' among them. The previously mentioned concept of mortality is also a substantial one to consider. In his interview, Stephen Snyder insightfully mentioned that one of the primary links between the exhibitions that have succeeded in becoming blockbusters for the Franklin Institute are thematic through-lines dealing with the ideas of human mortality and death. Examples of these are not difficult to find – once again *Titanic*, *Body Worlds*, the NCC's *Diana*, and even *Tut* come to mind. This is further evidence to support the argument that a reverential subject matter is a notable piece of the blockbuster puzzle.

As Michael Belcher writes in his description of the advantages exhibitions have as mediums of communication, the most important and unique characteristic of museum exhibition is that it facilitates an encounter between visitors and three-dimensional objects. Only exhibition provides a controlled contact with real, authentic objects, and this is what makes museum exhibitions so vitally important;⁷⁵ hence the importance of the museum's role as a place that can provide contemporary visitors with this reverential experience.

⁷⁵ Michael Belcher, "Exhibition as a Medium of Communication," in *Exhibitions in Museums* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1991), 38.

In an examination of the authenticity of experience in museums, Hilde Hein writes that although audiences profess to revere the integrity of museums, it is still crucial that they experience the ‘real thing.’⁷⁶ Although the real thing is certainly represented by the artifacts within an exhibition, the idea of extending authenticity beyond the objects is also an important one for delivering on the promise of reverence. In his piece discussing the inherent advantage belonging to the museum when it comes to providing the experience of authenticity, Kevin Moore explains that museums not only benefit from the power of the real thing, but also have at their disposal the power of the real place, and the real person⁷⁷. What results is a tri-fold power of the real, and Moore asserts that the most successful and effective representations of the past, in museums or elsewhere, are those which employ all three elements in concert with one another.

The ability to capitalize on the museum’s home field advantage so to speak within an exhibition space only increases the opportunity for the visitor to feel connected to and immersed in the reverential subject matter. Design and ambience can serve as the setting for the real place, and strategic interpretation and content creates the real person. The museum’s possession of these keystones of authenticity allow visitors to a feature exhibition to come that much closer to the subject at hand, and the closer the better.

⁷⁶ Hilde Hein, “Museum Experience and the ‘Real Thing’” in *The Museum in Transition: A Philosophical Perspective* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 69.

⁷⁷ Kevin Moore “Museums and the Real Thing”, in *Museums and Popular Culture* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1997), 135.

The Icon Artifact

One of the most important factors that lends to the authenticity of an exhibition, and one that is absolutely a driver of popularity in blockbusters, is that of the icon artifact.

As Melissa Smith, Chief Operating Officer of the Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology noted in her interview, oftentimes what visitors say they are interested in and what timing and tracking studies show about their actions within exhibitions do not quite agree. One of these areas is that of artifacts. As she puts it, even though most people cite the artifacts as the element of the exhibition they are most interested in, observation generally shows that visitors actually spend the least amount of time interacting with them. This observation in itself is evidence of a considerable problem for museums. There can certainly be a gap between what visitors say they want to see and what they actually do within exhibitions. The challenge here is that when designing an exhibition, developers must decide where they will place their focus- on what visitors want, or on what they don't necessarily know or acknowledge that they want. This is another example of an issue that is best dealt with on an institutional level, and on a case-by-case basis.

That said, although it is certainly the case that often visitors believe they are more interested in the artifacts than perhaps their movements dictate, the fact that they continuously cite artifacts as an important element to them is notable. As illustrated in the graph below, 24.6% of survey respondents specifically cited the chance to see the corresponding artifacts as a reason they attended a blockbuster exhibition.⁷⁸

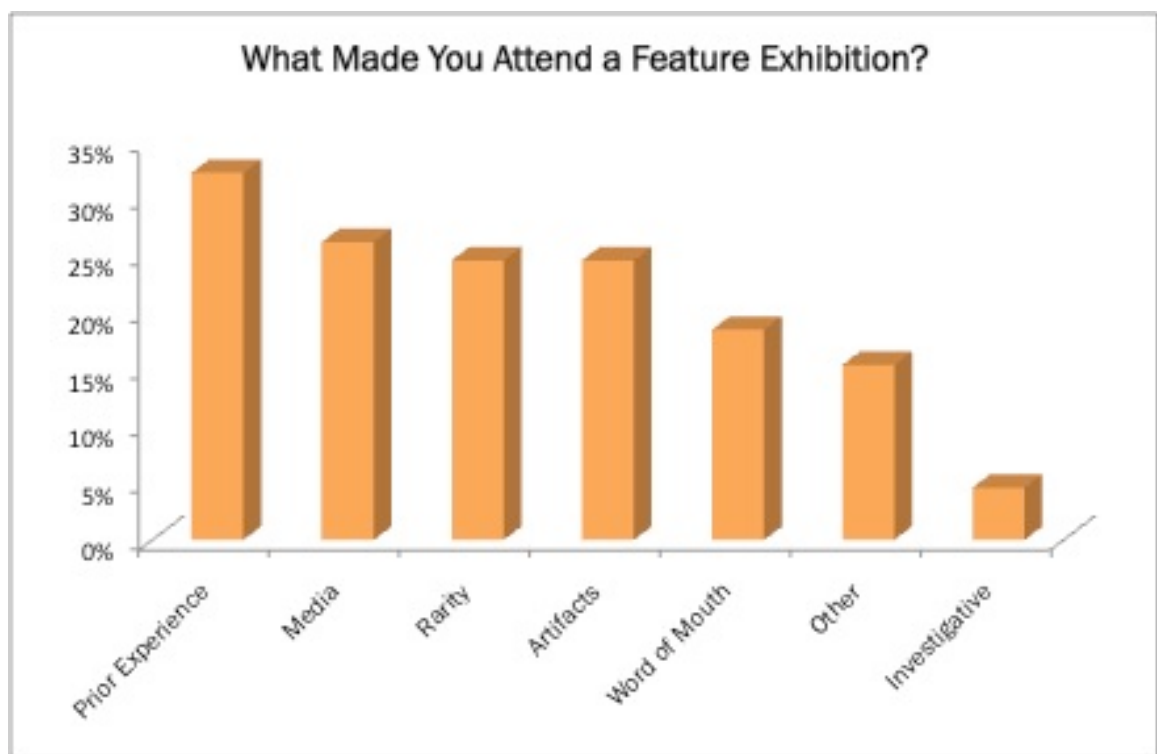


Table 5: Survey Response: "What made you attend a feature exhibition"?

The rarity and cultural significance of those artifacts of course continues to be important. The best way to illustrate this is through several applicable case study examples. When the contemporary iteration of *King Tut* came to the

⁷⁸ As indicated by the graph, 26.2 % of respondents cited media as a driver behind their attendance. These responses included references to marketing and promotional efforts, advertising, etc. Although it is yet another testament to the influence of marketing, that issue has already been addressed and thus is not discussed in the examination of this data.

Franklin Institute in 2007, it was an excellent example of an exhibition that delivered on ‘wow-factor’ artifacts. It featured the famous room of gold, and countless objects that belonged directly to the boy king. A powerful contrast to this is another Egypt-based exhibition at the Franklin *Cleopatra*. Although the famous queen was obviously the headliner, that show contained only one artifact that was directly related to her: a piece of papyrus bearing her signature. The reason behind this, of course, is perfectly understandable. As Steven Snyder of the host institution Franklin Institute put it, other than that scroll, “there’s not really much left [of Cleopatra]; they did a good job of wiping her out.”

These two exhibitions highlight the importance of ‘icon artifacts’. Although they were both well-designed exhibitions about ancient Egypt, the lack of an iconic artifact that visitors could attribute to Queen Cleopatra left them wanting, and thus influenced its lower attendance number. Of course, a comparison between these two exhibitions must be qualified by the understanding of the history and widespread anticipation behind *Tut*. In fairness, no other exhibition has come close to *Tut*’s success, and there are several reasons for that which lay outside the scope of this study. The comparison here between the two exhibits in terms of the importance of iconic artifacts, however, is absolutely a valid one.

Two other case studies that are good examples to illustrate the importance of the icon artifact are the *Diana* and *Bruce Springsteen* exhibitions at the National Constitution Center (NCC). Although Springsteen is arguably one of the United States' most famous musicians and a personality steeped in Americana, there is no specific icon artifact that fans of Springsteen or potential visitors to the exhibition could point to that is *representative* of the artist, and would thus compel them to come see it. There are arguably several artifacts included in the exhibition that visitors familiar with Springsteen would immediately recognize, such as the white tee shirt and jeans worn by the artist in the cover photo adorning his *Born in the USA* album, and a Fender guitar that resonated well with visitors. However, Springsteen as a personality in general lacks an iconic artifact that is associated with his career and persona.

The opposite was true for the hugely successful *Diana* exhibition. In this case, the icon artifact was undoubtedly the late Princess's wedding dress. During *Diana's* run, I worked as a volunteer for the NCC, and saw and listened to the visitor reaction to that incredible artifact first hand. Visitors knew that the dress was there, and many had come specifically to see it. In the same review that was previously cited, Debora Toth quotes a visitor who commented "You can't see the detail and exact color of that dress in a photo. You have to see the real thing up close."⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Debora Toth, "Princess Diana Exhibition at Philadelphia's National Constitution Center until December 31, 2009," *Philadelphia Examiner*, October 18, 2009.



Fig. 12: Lady Diana Spencer's wedding gown and bridesmaid dress on display at the National Constitution Center in 2009. Photo courtesy of the Mainline Media News.

In many cases, the draw behind the icon artifact is inexorably linked with the previously mentioned criteria of reverence. These two tend to go hand in hand, and Diana's dress is a good example. That dress became iconic on her wedding day because of its dramatic and fantastic design, but passed into legend upon her untimely passing. In a way, this presents a challenge for museums in that they must preserve a balance in the exhibition's design that allows visitors to feel close to the object but still maintains its reverential aura. However, it is also helpful in that it helps to identify the 'why' behind the fascination with the icon artifact.

Another testament to the importance of icon artifact(s) in a true blockbuster exhibition is the negative reaction a museum can incur when an anticipated icon artifact is missing. Although it is far from being a failure in

general, *Tut* also represents an example of visitor disappointment when this happens to be the case. As Steven Snyder described, “I can’t tell you the number of people who told me that they were upset that the Tut mummy was not in the exhibition, because in the ‘70s they saw it. Of course, the Tut mummy has never left Egypt – it’s never been more than I think 500 yards from the tomb. But they swear in their minds that they were there and took a picture with it.”⁸⁰ Although Mr. Snyder’s comments were in response to a question about visitor expectations for exhibitions, his observation speaks directly to the heart of the power of the icon artifact.

In some cases, the related icon to the exhibition’s theme may not necessarily be one specific object. It is also possible that the icon experience may come from a collection of similar objects that are representational of the topic. For example, one survey respondent indicated that they were interested in seeing an exhibition about the city of Pompeii. In this specific case, the icon artifacts would be the famous bodies encased in ash. There is not necessarily one specific example that most visitors would identify as a must-see, and any one could serve the intended purpose. When examining potential exhibition themes, this caveat of the argument may present an advantage in the feasibility of delivering on the promise of an icon artifact for the visitor.

An icon artifact or artifacts is not necessarily a requirement for a successful blockbuster, but it will certainly improve a feature exhibition’s

⁸⁰ Steven Snyder interview, Sep. 17, 2012.

chances of reaching that status. One other important thing for museums to consider when evaluating exhibition themes against these criteria is not only the existence or presence of a definitive icon artifact, but also the potential for highlighting an existing artifact *as* an icon. Although this approach is relatively risky and may not pay off, it is still an option to leave on the table.

Voice

It is understood across the field that outstanding creativity and quality of design is a crucial element for a successful exhibition in today's environment. It is perhaps less commonly recognized, however, that a contemporary audience is still very much in tune with and motivated by a show's written content. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, the survey question of what makes a feature interesting and engaging saw 51% of responses cite experiential elements within the exhibition space. Not surprisingly, 57.4% of those respondents indicated design as an engaging element. The continuous development of the modern multi-dimensional exhibition has proven the power and desirability of dynamic design. The standout data point here was that 51.4% of answers featured references to a new or unexpected approach to the contextual interpretation within the exhibition. These answers were coded

using the tag ‘voice.’

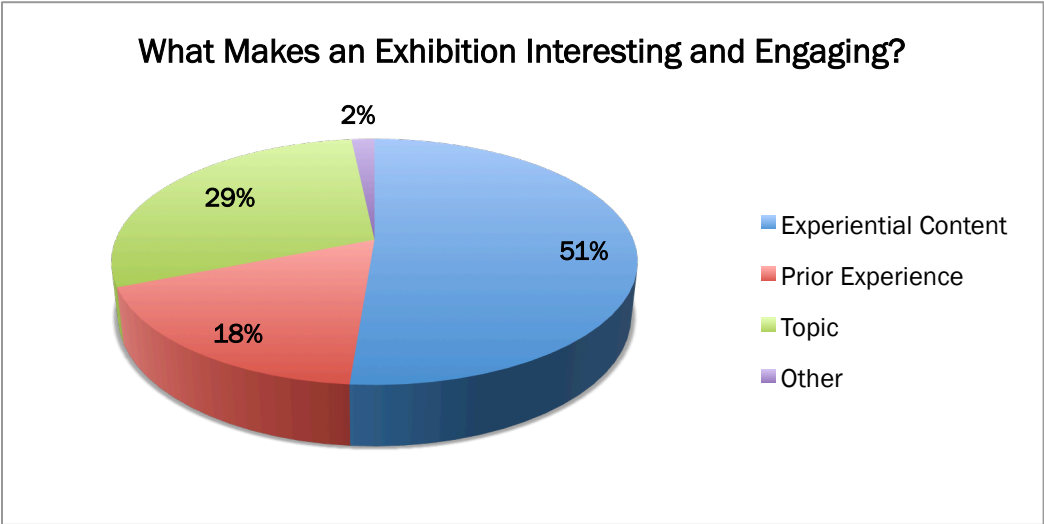


Table 6: Survey Response: "What makes an exhibition interesting and engaging"?

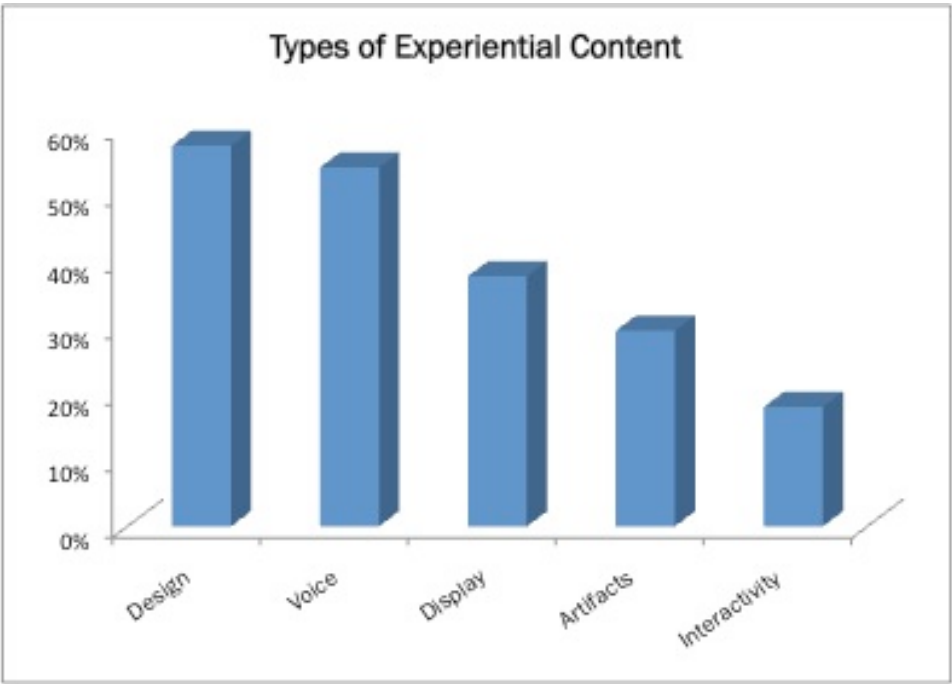


Table 7: Survey Response: "What makes an exhibition interesting and engaging" types of experiential content

Further proof of the prominence of a new or unexpected interpretive voice on visitors' wish lists, is the following graph, which represents responses to the survey question "What makes a feature exhibition extraordinary?" Voice was the most cited code amongst these responses, appearing in 36.5%. The use of the word 'extraordinary' in the question was strategic, in that the question was designed to help understand what makes a feature exhibition stand out from the competition, and thus make it more likely to garner high attendance.

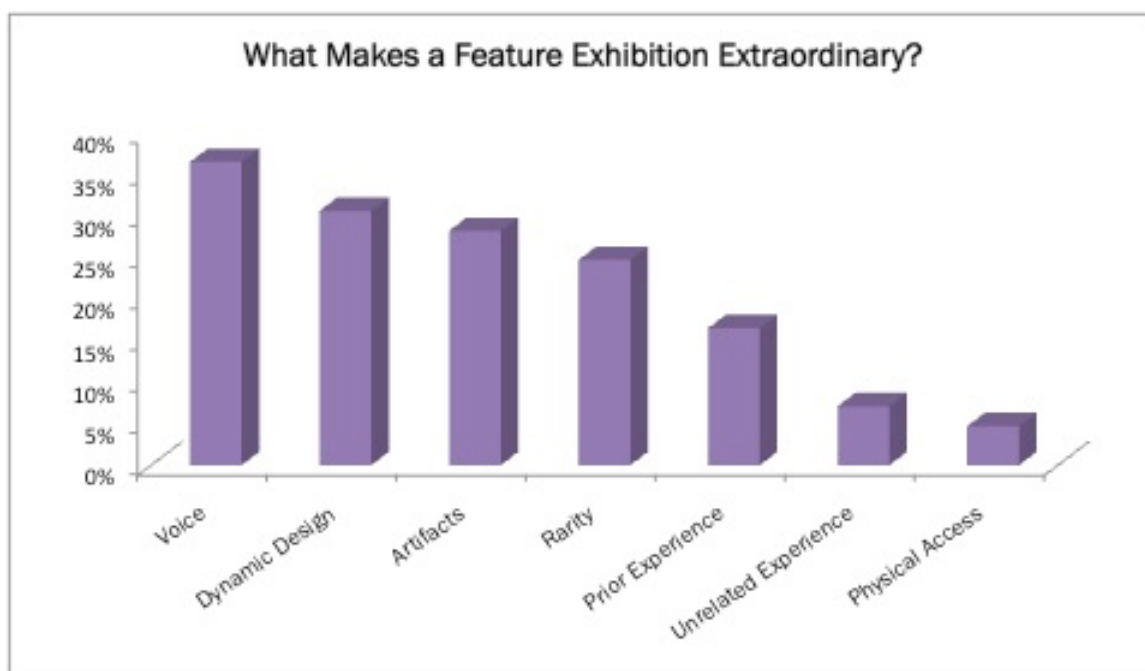


Table 8: Survey Response: "What makes a feature exhibition extraordinary"?

As noted before, in each of these cases the 'voice' coded responses reference a new exploration of a subject – a twist that adds a sense of excitement and newness to a topic that visitors may not necessarily have thought about before. Although it may be enough to just exhibit the canon or

draw visitors with the sheer star power of a theme or an iconic artifact, one way to dig a bit deeper into the content that visitors are looking for is to frame the content in an unexpected way. This can also apply to using the exhibition medium to make a culturally popular but somewhat academic topic more relatable. However, I would argue that visitors are not going to respond well to an exhibition that has completely turned a familiar and widely known theme completely on its head. This strays into territory of beginning to undercut that familiarity which is the number one reason the visitor is there. Nonetheless, a part of the narrative should ideally ask questions or make comparisons, or introduce visitors to facets of the exhibition's theme that are somewhat unexpected. Once again, *Diana* is a good example. Although the show certainly evoked images of the grandeur and cultural mystique of royalty, it also paid homage to Diana Spencer's relatively normal upbringing. As Rachel Goodman of the *Montgomery News* wrote in her review of the exhibition, "As you walk through you notice that most of the artifacts on display are those of a normal girl growing up in the latter half of the 20th century. Instead of feeling like this is a girl from a privileged world, you feel more like you are on her level and that she is someone to whom you can relate."⁸¹

⁸¹ Rachel Goodman, "Princess Diana Visits the National Constitution Center," *The Montgomery News*, October 31, 2009.

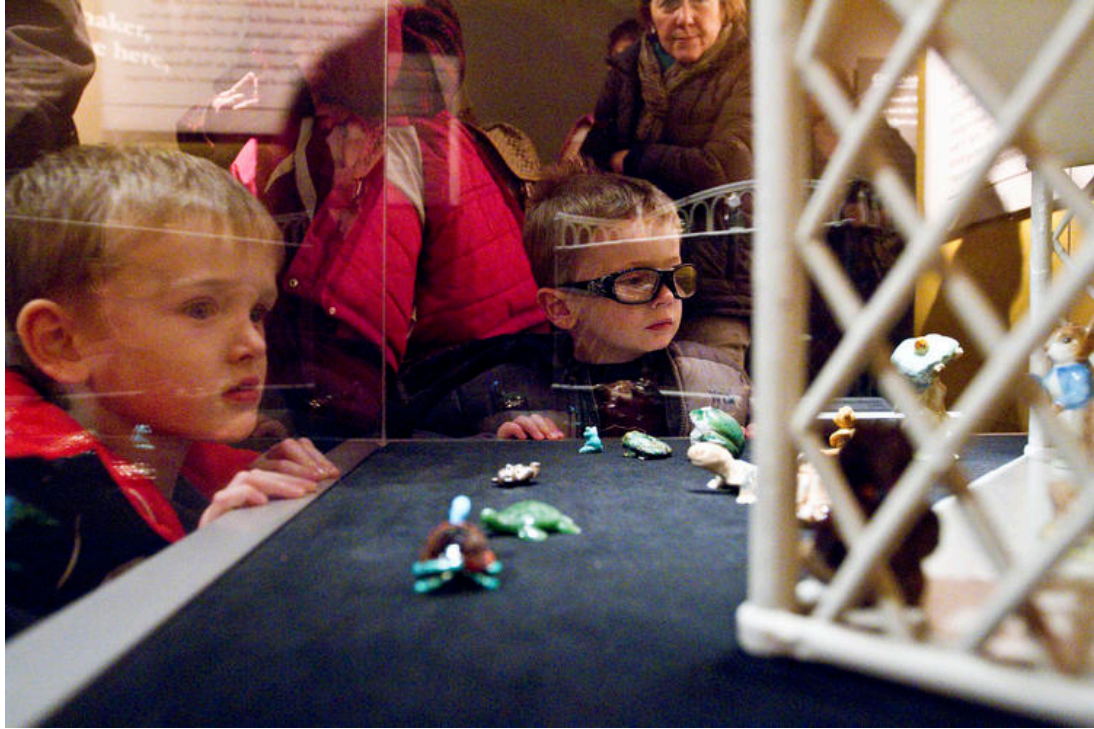


Fig. 13: Visitors to *Diana: The Exhibition* during its run in Bloomington, MN look at a display of Diana's childhood toys. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Daily News.

Another relatively recent example of a successful blockbuster that was centered on the concept of a new interpretative voice was 2005's *Body Worlds* at the Franklin Institute.



Fig. 14: Human specimen on display in *Body Worlds*. Photo courtesy of The Franklin Institute.

Somewhat controversial, the real human specimens on display within the exhibition had been immaculately preserved through Gunther von Hagens' process of plastination. Used to explain and demonstrate the incredible intricacies of human musculature, these specimens – and certainly the content in general – were undoubtedly presenting the human body in a new and evocative way. One survey respondent cited *Body Worlds* specifically when asked what it was about a feature exhibition that prompted their attendance, writing “A new way of looking at things. We loved *Body Worlds* because it was

such a different way to look at and understand the human body.” The show was so successful, in fact, that the Franklin Institute mounted *Body Worlds 2* in 2009.

Although *Body Worlds* is something of an extreme case, the exhibition’s premise and its resulting success is an undeniable testament to the power of reinvention in interpretive voice. One of the greatest advantages that museums have for doing this effectively is their position as trusted and established centers of informal learning. Because of this, they can push interpretive boundaries without the risk of alienating a formal audience. In fact, as evidenced by the data collected in this study, visitors look for this type of forward-thinking interpretation in blockbusters. Time Magazine writer Richard Lacayo noted in his 2009 article “In Defense of the Blockbuster” that as far as historical education goes, museums are just about the only real schoolrooms we have anymore, and museums that don’t regularly revisit the “familiar” chapters of that history are letting us down.⁸² Lacayo recognizes the value of the informal learning setting as a welcoming and comfortable one, and champions the blockbuster as a feel-good way to shamelessly enjoy the classics, so to speak.⁸³ What he misses, however, is that if museums do not capitalize on the opportunity to re-image these classics in new ways, they risk disappointing their audience; or at least, leaving them wanting.

⁸² Richard Lacayo, “In Praise of Blockbusters,” *Time Magazine*, September 17, 2009.

⁸³ Lacayo’s article deals exclusively with art exhibitions, but his point here transcends genres.

There are many different ways that museums can incorporate these experiential elements, and the best practices to do so are certainly not black and white. Museums must ensure that the ways they are realized within the exhibition work in concert with the overall goals and objectives. There is no way to completely formulate success in a blockbuster, and if a host institution concerns themselves only with these criteria and neglects the other key phases of the process (i.e. front-end evaluation, topic testing, etc.) they run the risk of not attaining a firm understanding of their primary audiences.

That said, by ensuring that a feature exhibition has the potential to fulfill as many of these criteria as possible, through whichever methods the host institution deems appropriate, the invested parties can certainly help bolster the chances that said exhibition will in fact be a blockbuster.

Chapter V: Conclusions



Fig. 15: Word cloud, created with wordle.net

The experiential elements of *Relatability and Cultural Relevance*, *Rarity*, *The Icon Artifact*, *Reverential Subject Matter* and *Voice* have been determined as drivers of success for blockbuster exhibitions. Visitors respond well to these elements, and are more likely to recommend them to others and therefore prompt higher attendance figures.

This study is not pointing out flaws in feature exhibitions missing these elements, however, nor does it contend that these elements are ones that every feature exhibition should have. As mentioned before, there are many different types of feature exhibitions, each with unique and specific goals and objectives. Not every feature exhibition ends up a blockbuster, but not every one is intended to be. However, by taking this first step towards decoding the blockbuster, the field can now access a preliminary set of criteria that should

help rank candidates for feature exhibitions in an effective way, and help exhibitions in development realize their full potential.

In this way, the study will help museums supplement their feature exhibition strategy outside of the blockbuster genre by providing guidance in creating exhibitions that are generally popular. It is reasonable to surmise that the presence of these experiential elements will prompt positive feedback in all feature exhibitions, regardless of their intended purpose and goals.

Furthermore, the phrasing of the survey questions asked respondents about general feature exhibitions in most cases, and only specifically referenced blockbusters in one question. Although the examples of the successful use of these elements all came from proven blockbuster exhibitions, that evidence also speaks to the potential for these criteria to help museums create more positive and engaging experiences for visitors in all feature exhibitions. As such, the resulting assessment tool is titled to imply its use for feature exhibitions in general, rather than just blockbusters. Similarly, it can be used by any non-art museum, regardless of size or scope, to help create effective and engaging exhibitions.

The following is the first iteration of these criteria in a worksheet format that could be used to evaluate potential exhibition themes:

Feature Exhibition Experience Assessment

Name of Exhibition:

Potential Schedule Slot:

Relatability / Cultural Relevance

Can a reference to the exhibition topic be identified in some area of contemporary popular culture? I.e. film, television, best-selling books, music, etc?

Does the exhibition topic relate to a significant current event, or the recent anniversary of a historically significant event?

Rarity

Does this exhibition topic have the opportunity to feature artifacts that local audiences may not have had an opportunity to see due to location, cost, etc.? If so, what?

Does this exhibition bring together a collection of artifacts that local audiences may not have had an opportunity to see as an ensemble? If so, what?

Reverential Subject Matter

Does this exhibition focus on theme, topic, figure or event that has gained a sense of 'reverence' in the contemporary cultural lexicon?

Does this exhibition provide an opportunity for immersive authenticity that includes the design, interpretive content, and collection?

The Icon Artifact

Are there one or two artifacts that could be considered representative of the exhibition's theme or topic as a whole?

Is that artifact(s) available for display?

Voice

Does this exhibition theme or topic present an opportunity for a new or unexpected interpretation of generally familiar content?

Can exhibition medium in general provide the opportunity for an interpretation of this theme or topic that the public may not have seen or experienced before?

Here is an example of the worksheet filled in, using *Diana: The Exhibition* as the potential feature. It illustrates the way in which museums can use this tool to not only determine whether a topic can provide the desired experiential elements, but how they can each be addressed.

Feature Exhibition Experience Assessment

Name of Exhibition: Diana: The Exhibition

Potential Schedule Slot; Fall, 2009

Relatability / Cultural Relevance

Can a reference to the exhibition topic be identified in some area of contemporary popular culture? I.e. film, television, best-selling books, music, etc?

Diana was a pop culture icon in her time- fashion, philanthropy, and the royal family. William and Harry have become celebrities in their own account now, as well. The movie "The Queen" about the royal family in the days following Diana's death came out in 2006, and won several Oscars.

Does the exhibition topic relate to a significant current event, or the recent anniversary of a historically significant event?

2007 marked the 10th anniversary of her death

Rarity

Does this exhibition topic have the opportunity to feature artifacts that local audiences may not have had an opportunity to see due to location, cost, etc.? If so, what?

Most of the artifacts related to Diana remain on permanent display in the UK. This is one of the few opportunities for people in this region to see them. We are the only museum in the region considering the show.

Does this exhibition bring together a collection of artifacts that local audiences may not have had an opportunity to see as an ensemble? If so, what?

The entire collection as a retrospective of Diana's life. The collection of her most famous dresses is also rare.

Reverential Subject Matter

Does this exhibition focus on theme, topic, figure or event that has gained a sense of 'reverence' in the contemporary cultural lexicon?

There is a certain amount of reverence around the royal family in that they have reached a somewhat legendary status. After Diana's death, this level of reverence tied to her memory only grew.

Does this exhibition provide an opportunity for immersive authenticity that includes the design, interpretive content, and collection?

Yes. There are several one-of-a-kind artifacts like the gowns and dresses in the collection. The feature space will also allow music and lighting to contribute to the immersive experience, whatever we strategize that to be.

The Icon Artifact

Are there one or two artifacts that could be considered representative of the exhibition's theme or topic as a whole?

Wedding gown. Jewelry/tiaras?

Is that artifact(s) available for display?

Yes- it is part of the collection and travels with the show.

Voice

Does this exhibition theme or topic present an opportunity for a new or unexpected interpretation of generally familiar content?

The artifacts and information about Diana's early childhood can paint a more down to earth picture of the princess. We can show the 'normal girl' side of her that made her so endearing, but that many people may have forgotten

about. Also, much of the drama surrounding the divorce has become the dominant characteristic when people think about the relationship between Charles and Diana. In this show, with the wedding dress, etc. we can focus on happier times and remind people of the sense of hope and romance that made their wedding so special.

Can exhibition medium in general provide the opportunity for an interpretation of this theme or topic that the public may not have seen or experienced before?

In a way. Exhibiting Diana gives visitors a chance to focus on a retrospective of her life in its entirety, which is difficult to do in a multi-dimensional, multi-media way in other formats.

This worksheet could be used during the development process as a litmus test for the potential success of exhibition themes under consideration.

It is also important to note that an exhibition may reach success as a blockbuster with only one, two or more of the criteria met. It would be extremely difficult to develop a feature exhibition that met all the criteria laid out here in house, let alone fulfill them all with a rental. However, most successful blockbusters fall comfortably into several of the categories. Each individual host institution must strategize their focus related to these experiential elements based on their specific goals for the show.

The life of this worksheet, and the criteria described therein, also extends beyond the initial decision making process. Once a theme for an exhibition is decided, this can also help guide its development or re-iteration within the host institution. But, as stated before, this stage of the process does not only apply to exhibition developers. The introduction to this piece outlined

how the study of understanding what drives blockbusters' popularity could benefit the following departments. The following are examples of ways they can each use the information presented here and the questions laid out in the worksheet to help strengthen an exhibition's chance for success.

Marketing and External Communication

Although the ultimate success of a blockbuster depends on whether the experiential elements therein deliver for its visitors enough to earn their recommendation to friends and family, marketing efforts could be aided by highlighting those experiences that have proven to drive popularity. Specific strategy should depend on the institution and what their overall marketing plan is, but one example could be to highlight an exhibition's icon artifact on all visual advertising, if the object lends itself to that use.⁸⁴ The repetition of a visual statement will help connect that icon artifact to the identity not only of the exhibition's topic, but to the exhibition itself. If the artifact(s) is clearly identifiable, an interesting twist to the marketing design could be to use an abstract image as a basis for a logo. For instance, the *Diana* exhibition's logo featured an abstract tiara, one of the most directly identifiable visual representations of the late Princess aside from her wedding gown.

⁸⁴ Many museums and exhibition development companies do this already.



Fig. 16: Princess Diana exhibition logo. Image courtesy of the Frazier History Museum.

Marketing and Communications copy and collateral design should also highlight as many of these experiential elements as possible in pieces that will communicate the features of the exhibition to the public, such as press releases, media alerts and web copy. Granted each format is different and lends itself to a specific voice, but including information about the applicable experiences when possible will bolster initial excitement surrounding the exhibition, and reinforce word of mouth recommendations once the show has begun its run.

Highlighting an exhibition's elements of rarity throughout these mediums is already a common strategy. This includes not only the rarity of the objects or the rare assemblage of a particular collection, but also the rare opportunity for visitors living in a certain area to see these objects because of where they live. It is key to prompt potential visitors to think about the circumstances surrounding the exhibition that make it rare *for them*, not just in general. The institution then also benefits from public appreciation as the place

that made this experience possible. One excellent example of this is found in a press release published by the Cincinnati Museum Center, announcing the arrival of the travelling exhibition *A Day in Pompeii*:

“Opening Friday, March 2, this highly anticipated exhibition features more than 250 priceless ancient artifacts that tell the story of daily life in Pompeii. Artifacts include frescos, gold coins and jewelry and detailed statuary perfectly preserved in volcanic ash from the sudden eruption of Mount Vesuvius in A.D. 79.

*Cincinnati Museum Center is one of only four stops, and the only stop between New York and Denver on this national tour.”*⁸⁵

By pointing out that this exhibition will only be featured in three other cities, the Cincinnati Museum Center succeeds in not only pointing out the rarity of the exhibition for visitors in the city, but for visitors across the country.

It is important for marketing and communications departments within museums to understand the experiential elements identified as drivers of success in blockbusters, as they are in a unique position to take advantage of the information and ensure the public knows they are there.

Programming

Programming is a terrific way to place more emphasis on these experiential elements, and hopefully increase the exhibitions success because of it. Programs could be developed to further explore any of the five experiential

⁸⁵ Cincinnati Museum Center, “A Day in Pompeii exhibition opens at Cincinnati Museum Center”, press release, <http://www.cincymuseum.org/press/pompeiiopens> (accessed 09/12/12).

elements identified in this study, and each host institution should strategize how they can best work in concert with one another. Examples of this are *Titanic*'s programs at the Franklin Institute that center around the legend of the sinking and our cultural reverence for the event.

Furthermore, in exhibitions that cannot feature all these experiential elements, some of that ground could be made up through programming. The best candidate for this would be the aspect of Voice. If a new interpretive spin on the content does not fit with the overall institutional goal for the exhibition, a program could be an excellent venue to explore new ways of understanding the topic.

The Board and Potential Funders

Recognizing that these five experiential elements represent the first step towards understanding the success of the blockbuster is also important for long term institutional planning. Each piece of information that may help museums create and host exhibitions that will be popular with visitors allows the museum to be more strategic in their actions. Knowing and understanding these trends will also help the museum hit their desired institutional notes. With a more informed strategy in place, this information will also help justify funding large-scale expensive exhibitions. A more informed investment is always a more attractive one.

Development

Similar in many ways to those for the Board, the advantages of using these criteria to help bolster an exhibition's chance of success directly benefit a host institution's development department. Knowing the implications of these trends for an exhibition's success, and could be extremely helpful for making a compelling case for support to either non-profit funders or corporate sponsors. The process of funding a museum exhibition is always an investment. For corporate sponsors, the investment lies in their related advertising opportunities and public exposure. For non-profit funders, the investment is in the exhibition's potential to have a lasting affect on its visitors. Regardless of the funders' motivations, coming to table armed with another layer of information supporting the exhibition's propensity for success can only help the case.

Visitors

When a museum has a greater understanding of what experiences within an exhibition are the most popular and compelling, the visitor truly reaps the greatest reward. No matter the expectations or identity category of the visitor when they walk across the threshold, if there are experiential elements within an exhibition that have proven to drive popularity, the chances are greater that

each individual will walk away having enjoyed themselves. There is also a greater chance that they will recommend the exhibition to a friend.

Furtherance of the Study

This study takes an essential first step towards understanding what elements of feature exhibitions that visitors respond to, and how these shows cross over the blockbuster threshold. As such, there are many different directions in which the research could go from here, and several important ways that it can be built upon.

Firstly, now that the initial assessment tool has been developed, it would be beneficial to use it as a rubric to measure past examples of both successful and non-successful blockbusters. In so doing, the field could gain a deeper understanding of the intricacies of how the public responds to each element, and how they rank in comparison to one another. The results would also help refine the tool to be a stronger indicator of potential success, and give museums more guidance on their creative strategy. For example, a second iteration could indicate where museums should place narrative or design emphasis to achieve a desired visitor response.

To this point, it is important to consider the different ways in which these travelling exhibitions are developed. Most are created specifically to travel, and therefore have no institutional target audience in mind during their

development. Another furtherance of this study could be to examine the blockbuster development process more thoroughly, and understand how the exhibition design teams strategize the content. The results may show that successful designers focus on these experiential criteria, or that a pattern of successes and failures can be tied to their presence or absence.

In terms of determining the experiential criteria, this study would ideally have included more surveys. Although the responses were not necessarily the most important element of the study, and the methodology used to attain them was geared towards representing a wide swath of public opinion, a continuation of this study would benefit from surveying a greater number of people. It is anticipated that a larger sample would follow the same data trends seen in this study, and thus further substantiate the conclusions. More importantly, the nature of this study and its attempt to attain a broad primary overview of public opinion dictated that the questions be appropriately broad in focus. A further study could involve surveying specific target audiences. It would also be beneficial to study and survey specific groups that a museum may want to serve with an exhibition, i.e. underserved communities, certain regional or local groups, or tourists to the city that have specifically chosen to attend the host museum. A study built around the same goals of determining trends that influence an exhibition's popularity, but with a focus on the audiences that a museum wishes to reach more effectively, could be extremely helpful in

meeting those goals. Because blockbuster exhibitions are so generally popular with such democratic appeal, museums may be able to comfortably exercise a concerted focus on their desired audiences without alienating the general public. An audience-specific off shoot of this study could help museums continue to reach visitors from all walks of life.

This sub-group studying could also involve looking at different visitor identity subgroups. The study undertaken at the Dallas Museum of Art by Bonnie Pitman and Ellen Hirzy is a good example. By focusing on the experiential expectations of various psychographic visitor identities, the field could emerge with a more nuanced set of criteria that can inform exhibition development decisions for multiple audiences.

Another element to consider is that of the timing of visitor surveys. For this study, surveys relied on respondents' memories of appealing exhibitions and experiences. In so doing, it was able to capture their opinions on the subject without being prompted with specific examples. A beneficial furtherance, however, would be to survey visitors about these criteria before and after they tour a feature exhibition. In this way, it could be determined whether the emerging trends match those of this study. By understanding these two pieces of information together, the field can move another step forward in determining a ranking system for these experiential elements, and ultimately creating more engaging shows.

To that effect, each of the five primary criteria identified here should be explored in greater depth. By delving more deeply, museums may be able to identify more trends that could inform the ways each of these elements could be optimally presented in exhibitions. Similarly, a more extensive investigation of each element may shed light on different ways of implementing the experience within the exhibition space. This then may allow for more specific strategy in the design and content development. Although it is unclear how accurately successful exhibitions can be examined and dissected and still represent distinct trends, a logical furtherance of this study would be to continue to dissect until the trends become indistinguishable. Furthermore, museums should incorporate questions that focus on gathering visitor feedback about these experiential elements when applicable in summative exhibition evaluations. This will further customize the data to an institutional level.

An additional furtherance of this study would be to examine how these criteria could be implemented in feature exhibitions in smaller museums with limited budgets. One of the hallmarks of today's blockbuster is the spectacle it creates, and that spectacle comes at a premium cost. That is not to say, however, that the experiential criteria identified in this study could not be found in smaller or less expensive features. An interesting follow-up would be to study current examples of this and determine current best practices, as well as ways to help small museums capture as many of the criteria as possible. As

noted before, this assessment tool can be used by a museum of any size to evaluate how an exhibition can provide these experiences for visitors. A closer look at how they can be incorporated and highlighted on a slender budget could help smaller museums bolster outreach efforts by engaging more visitors with their exhibitions. Understanding the positive impact of these criteria can also aid struggling museums gain financial ground through feature exhibitions.

Finally, as this study focuses solely on the experiential elements within an exhibition aside from marketing, an important companion piece would be an in-depth examination of that marketing. This could involve studying the marketing efforts in the promotion of blockbusters, and comparing marketing language, budgets, and channels against the five experiential criteria with successful and unsuccessful examples. This work would shed light how external efforts contribute to and influence an exhibition's success, how these experiential elements can best be integrated into marketing efforts, and whether that integration really has a positive effect.

Blockbuster exhibitions represent an excellent and effective way for museums to engage new audiences, and bring exciting stories to life. They are great conduits between the museum and the public, and provide one of the few remaining forums where the line between academia and contemporary culture

can be blurred. Within these spaces, learning can mingle shamelessly with spectacle, and different audiences can all be brought under the spell of coming into contact with the most compelling chapters of our shared human history. By taking the first steps towards understanding what experiences within these wonderful spaces that visitors find most engaging and compel them to recommend visiting to their friends and family, museums can begin to make more informed decisions about what exhibitions will reach true blockbuster status.

Appendix I: Evaluation Tool

Feature Exhibition Experience Assessment

Name of Exhibition:

Potential Schedule Slot:

Relatability / Cultural Relevance

Can a reference to the exhibition topic be identified in some area of contemporary popular culture? I.e. film, television, best-selling books, music, etc?

Does the exhibition topic relate to a significant current event, or the recent anniversary of a historically significant event?

Rarity

Does this exhibition topic have the opportunity to feature artifacts that local audiences may not have had an opportunity to see due to location, cost, etc.? If so, what?

Does this exhibition bring together a collection of artifacts that local audiences may not have had an opportunity to see as an ensemble? If so, what?

Reverential Subject Matter

Does this exhibition focus on theme, topic, figure or event that has gained a sense of 'reverence' in the contemporary cultural lexicon?

Does this exhibition provide an opportunity for immersive authenticity that includes the design, interpretive content, and collection?

The Icon Artifact

Are there one or two artifacts that could be considered representative of the exhibition's theme or topic as a whole?

Is that artifact(s) available for display?

Voice

Does this exhibition theme or topic present an opportunity for a new or unexpected interpretation of generally familiar content?

Can exhibition medium in general provide the opportunity for an interpretation of this theme or topic that the public may not have seen or experienced before?

Appendix II: Survey Instrument

Question 1: What motivates you to attend a feature exhibition?

Multiple-Choice Options (choose all that apply)

- You know something about the subject matter and want to learn more
- You know little to nothing about the subject matter and want to learn more
- The subject matter has personal meaning for you through your education
- The subject matter has personal meaning for you through popular culture or cultural experience
- You find the subject matter relevant to your everyday life
- You find the subject matter lies outside your everyday experience
- Other (please Specify)

Question 2: What makes the theme of a feature exhibition interesting enough to prompt your attendance?

Free response

Question 3: What artifact elements within a feature exhibition do you enjoy the most?

Multiple-Choice Options (choose all that apply)

- Artifacts whose use or purpose is easily identifiable
- Artifacts whose use or purpose is unfamiliar
- Traditional artifact labels (straightforward information, etc.)
- Non-traditional artifact labels (labels that pose questions, provide unexpected information, etc.)
- I do not generally enjoy artifacts

Question 4: What non-artifact elements do you enjoy the most within feature exhibitions?

Multiple-Choice Options (choose all that apply)

- Video displays
- Tactile displays
- Visitor Feedback / Suggestions displays
- Areas where you can share your own personal connections or reactions to the exhibition

Question 5: Please rank the styles of exhibition narrative in order of your preference

- Chronological
- Thematic
- Chronological and Thematic Combined

Question 6: In your own words, what makes a feature exhibition interesting and engaging to you?

Free Response

Question 7: Have you ever attended a feature exhibition that was considered a 'Blockbuster'?

Yes or No

Question 8: If yes, what about the exhibition(s) made you want to attend?

Free Response

Question 9: In your opinion, what makes a feature exhibition extraordinary?

Free Response

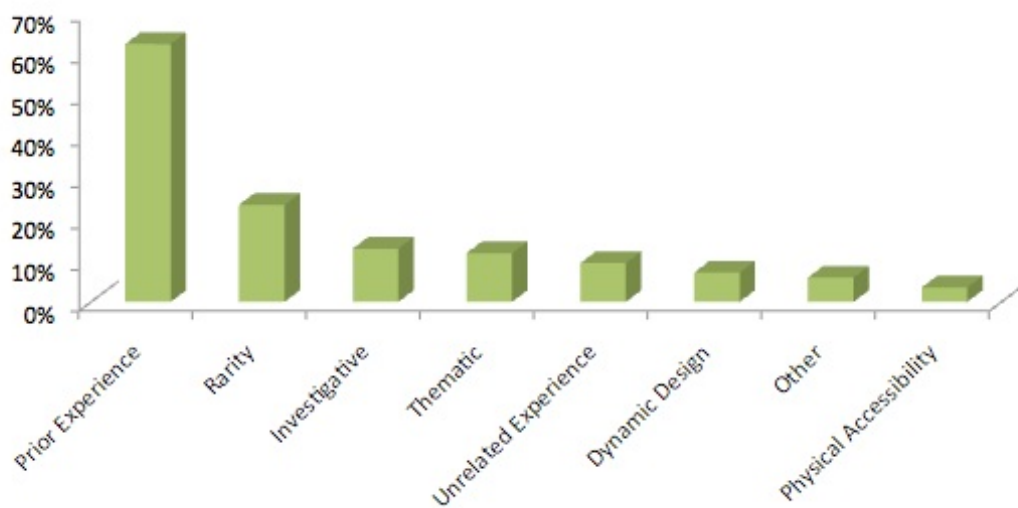
Appendix III: Survey Results

Question 1: What motivates you to attend a feature exhibition?

You know something about the subject matter and want to learn more		70.6%
You know little to nothing about the subject matter and want to learn more		37.6%
The subject matter has personal meaning for you through your education		44.7%
The subject matter has personal meaning for you through popular culture or cultural experience		50.6%
You find the subject matter relevant to your everyday life		21.2%
You find the subject matter lies outside your everyday experience		20.0%
Other (please specify) Hide Responses		7.1%

Question 2:

What Makes the Theme of An Exhibition Interesting Enough to Prompt Your Attendance?



Coding:

Prior Experience: Includes responses addressing cultural and historical significance. The reasoning for this is that if a potential visitor believes a topic is culturally significant, they must have had some prior experience with it upon which they have based those opinions.

Unrelated Experience: The visitor's response implies no prior experience with the topic.

Rarity: The response indicates rarity of the objects displayed as a primary driver. This also includes responses citing limited time runs.






Thematic: Responses imply the holistic or 'survey course' nature of the exhibition.

Dynamic Design: Contemporary design featuring interactive features and stimulating environments.





Physical Access: The exhibition is in an easily accessible location and institution. This includes references to pricing.

Investigative: This covers responses that are intrigued by the 'mysterious', ones that enjoy a question and answer content layout, ones that favor a new interpretation of a familiar topic, and responses that mention current or active research.

Question 3: What artifact elements do you enjoy the most?

Artifacts whose use or purpose is easily identifiable		36.5%
Artifacts whose use or purpose is unfamiliar		48.2%
Traditional artifact labels (straightforward information, etc.)		34.1%
Non-traditional artifact labels (labels that pose questions, provide unexpected information, etc.)		49.4%
I do not generally enjoy artifacts		4.7%

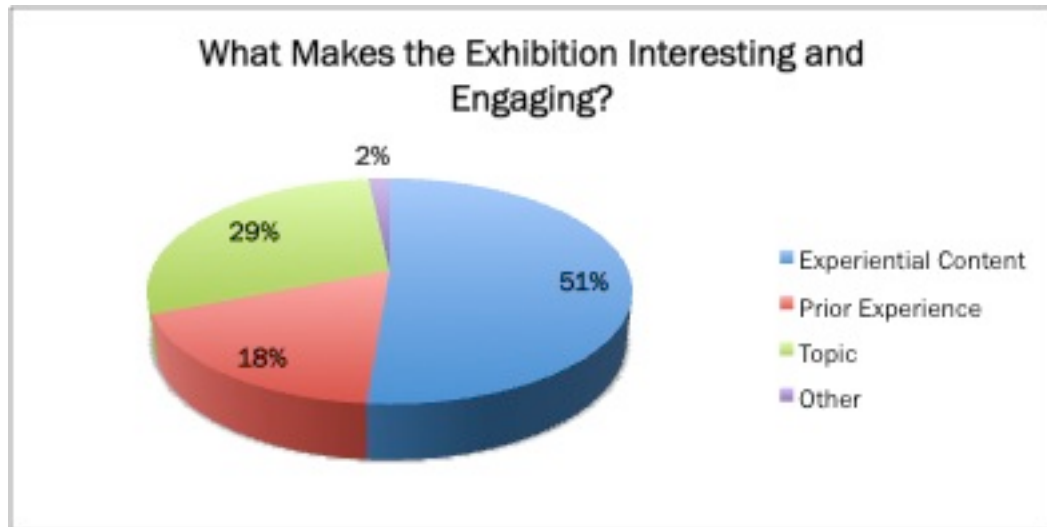
Question 4: What non-artifact elements do you enjoy the most?

Video displays		32.9%
Tactile displays		79.3%
Visitor Feedback / Suggestions displays		4.9%
Areas where you can share your own personal connections or reactions to the exhibition		17.1%

Question 5: Please rank the styles of exhibition narrative in order of your preference:

	1	2	3	Rating Average
Chronological	27.1% (23)	28.2% (24)	44.7% (38)	2.18
Thematic	28.2% (24)	37.6% (32)	34.1% (29)	2.06
Chronological and Thematic Combined	44.7% (38)	34.1% (29)	21.2% (18)	1.76

Question 6:

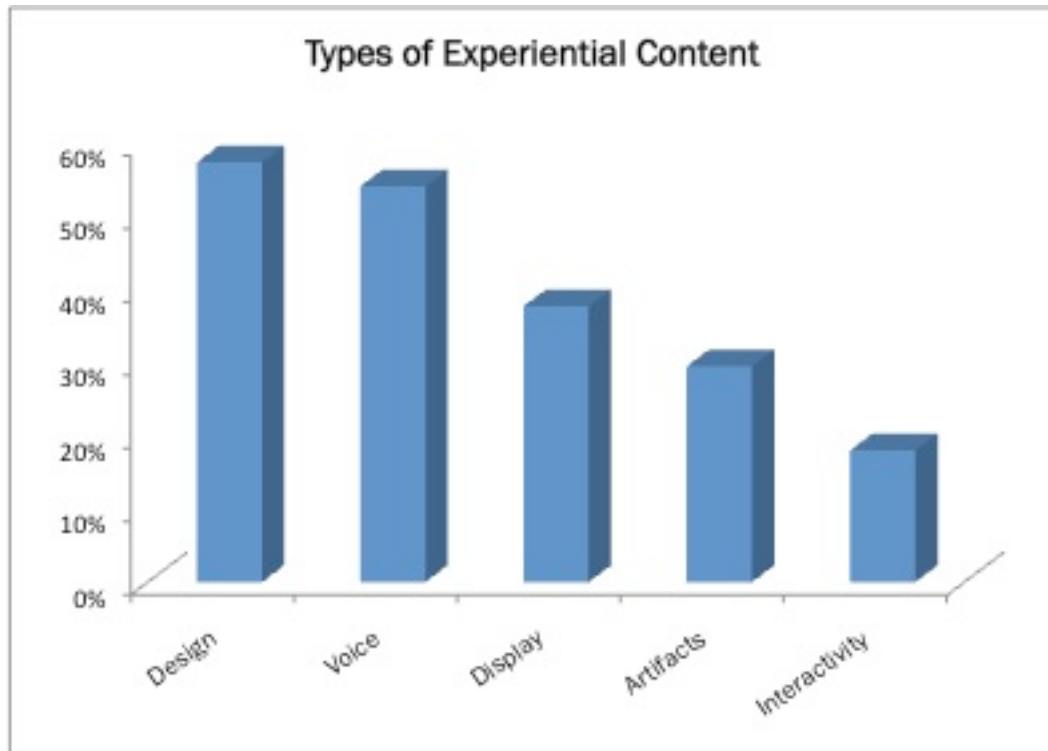


Coding:

Experiential Content: Response cites specific experiences within the exhibition space.

Prior Experience: Response cites that exhibition deals with a topic they know something about or find relevance with.

Topic: The response cites the topic itself.



Experiential Content Coding:

Display: Includes references to the way content is displayed or juxtaposed.

Design: Includes references to lighting, color, or other visual or audio design elements This code is also used for responses that reference the physical space and layout of the exhibition.

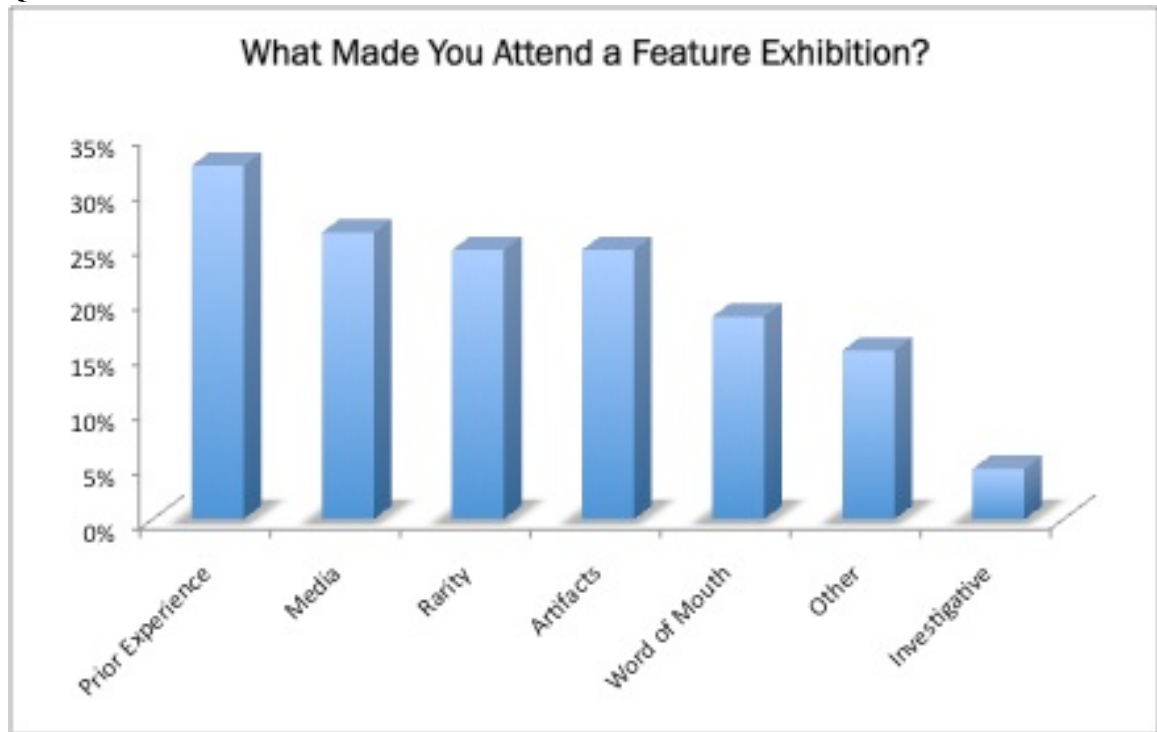
Interactivity: Responses that cite interactive elements within exhibitions. **Artifacts:** Responses that specifically cite artifacts, not just display in general.

Voice: Responses with this code cite the exhibition's written content and references to content-based elements such as 'narrative' and 'story'.

Question 7: Have you ever attended a 'blockbuster'?

Yes	<div style="width: 77.6%;"></div>	77.6%
No	<div style="width: 22.4%;"></div>	22.4%

Question 8:



Codes:

Rarity: References the rarity of the objects present in the exhibition, or the rarity of the chance that the visitor will be able to see them again. This also references the limited time to visit an exhibition.

Media: Advertising content or media messaging.

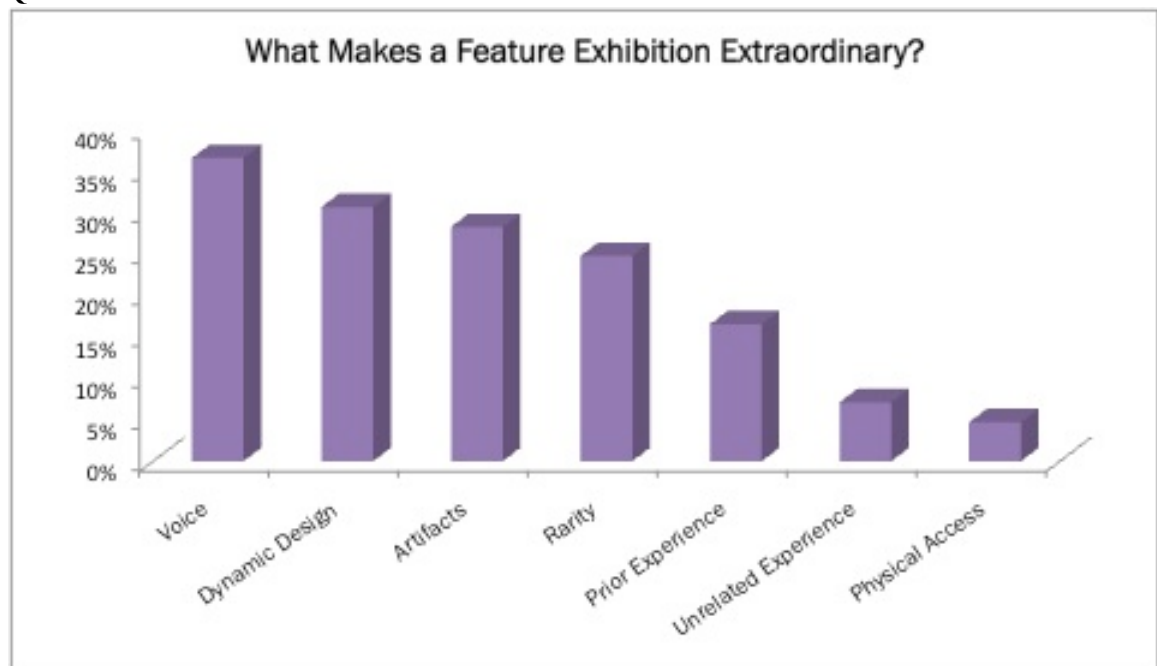
Word of Mouth: Cites recommendations from friends or personal discussion.

Prior Experience: Cites that the subject matter was one they found interesting due to prior experience with or knowledge of the topic.

Artifacts: References to the objects themselves.

Investigative: This covers responses that are intrigued by the 'mysterious', ones that enjoy a question and answer content layout, ones that favor a new interpretation of a familiar topic, and responses that mention current or active research.

Question 9:



Codes:

Prior Experience: Includes responses addressing cultural and historical significance. The reasoning for this is that if a potential visitor believes a topic is culturally significant, they must have had some prior experience with it upon which they have based those opinions.

Unrelated Experience: The visitor's response implies no prior experience with the topic.

Rarity: The response indicates rarity of the objects displayed as a primary driver.

This also includes responses citing limited time runs.

Voice: Written narrative of the exhibition.

Dynamic Design: Contemporary design featuring interactive features and stimulating environments.

Physical Access: The exhibition is in an easily accessible location and institution.

This includes references to pricing.

Artifacts: Specifically references artifacts.

Investigative: This covers responses that are intrigued by the 'mysterious', ones that enjoy a question and answer content layout, ones that favor a new interpretation of a familiar topic, and responses that mention current or active research.

Interactivity: Specifically mentions interactivity within the exhibition.

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