

User Needs Assessment Summary

Needs and preferences of prospective users of and contributors to the ExhibitFiles site were probed through in-depth interviews (December 2004) and an e-mail survey (April-May 2005). Interviewees (6) were exhibits professionals who had purchased *Are We There Yet?*. Survey respondents (19) included participants in the Exploratorium Best Practices Conference and prospective Core Contributors. Represented were small, medium, and large science centers; an aquarium, observatory, and children's museum; and independent design and fabrication firms. Respondents included developers (scientists, writers), prototypers, designers, builders, project managers, and executive directors.

An online resource like ExhibitFiles would be highly valued

Survey respondents, asked "how valuable would you say a resource like this would be to you?", ranked ExhibitFiles an average 4.7 on a 5-point scale, where 5 is "very valuable."

Interviewees, asked "Would you like to see more exhibition case studies?", unanimously responded "yes." Comments: "as many as possible," "helps with 20/20 hindsight," "wish they were online so I could refer people."

Site design features will increase use

Survey respondents checked off site features they thought would increase the likelihood of their use of—and contributions to—the ExhibitFiles site, and offered numerous suggestions. Most important features for nearly all respondents:

Easy to upload images and documents

Easy to register

Easy to search

Flexibility in required formats, e.g., single exhibit units as well as entire exhibition records

More than half also said these features would increase their use of the site:

Listing of suppliers of products and services useful in your work

Information about traveling exhibitions available for rent

Suggestions from both survey respondents and interviewees clustered in the following ways:

Images, visuals

"Visuals to illustrate ideas essential—exhibits people are visual learners. Use links off your site when appropriate."

"Should be heavily illustrated"

"Good photos"

“Possible to have Quicktime VR (panorama) or short quicktime movies of kinetic exhibits for download?”

“Would there be enough bandwidth for small Quicktime movies? Images would enhance the reports.”

Lessons learned—good ideas, bad ideas, evaluation results

“Need more honest reporting of lessons learned. Include ‘what would I do differently and why.’”

“A good as well as a bad idea bank, i.e., ‘what I tried that really did not work well and why.’ What you never hear about are ideas that start off well and just don’t make it.”

“Info on flops/problems as well as successes”

“Summaries of any evaluations”

“How about evaluations also?”

“Tell how partnerships/collaborations worked”

“Successful ways to integrate the exhibits with online activities, and with programs at the museum.”

“Case studies on best practices.”

“Include voices of exhibit developers—how they made decisions, struggled, what their feelings were while working. Would like to see a hard struggle that reached the ‘aha’ moment after a lot of work.”

“Would like to know about how decision made to build exhibition, about project selection.”

Include images and comments submitted by designers, fabricators, and educators. The *Cookbooks* are so charming in part because they include commentary about what works, what they’d do differently if they did the exhibit again, etc.

Exhibit specs, costs, nuts and bolts information

“Data regarding size/square footage, target audience, exhibit lists”

“Without being overly simplistic, nuts and bolts information (or links to it) and cost estimates (or actuals).”

“Reviews of specialty products, materials used in exhibits”

“Info on operational costs and upkeep costs —rules of thumb. How to help clients plan for the big picture of the project.”

“Include budget information”

“Include design and fabrication firms involved in exhibition”

Comments, critiques, discussion

“Needs a participatory element—a comment page that allows people to state what is significant in this exhibition or helpful in their own work.”

“Increasing peer review might be a great thing for our little ‘industry’.”

“Comments section for each exhibition as in blogs or Amazon books (probably should only be for registered users to discourage pranksters and trolls”

“Critique feature would be very helpful—a fresh set of eyes.”

“Reviews from users in the museum field”

“Use nominating system—take into account ratings as in selection of case studies for book.”

“Reviews of work ok if there are predetermined standards, e.g., Beverly Serrell’s work”

“*Discussion* of your work by colleagues”

“Book is point in time, stops too soon. Need to keep the conversation going in a dialogue. Having it online can do that... You can create a dynamic conversation for the exhibit team, but the field needs a way to have a dialogue as well.”

“Make it a dialogue about building and equally important, facilitating learning around the exhibitions. I think that the future of the field will see a convergence of exhibit and program professionals. We can no longer afford to think about fun or interesting exhibitions without how they are supporting the style of learning that we want to facilitate, and the visitor behavior and content objectives.”

“I am sure that you have looked at the Explo ExNet web page. We all thought that this format would create a forum around these exhibit components. I think that the site was very well done, but the conversation did not develop as we all, thought.”

High-quality—and varied—content

“Range of exhibits/museums (not just the “big guys”!)”

“There are some really great small exhibitions—want to hear about them.”

“Editor—I’d want the structure to be relatively hard and fast so that I wouldn’t have to wade through a ramble or crash my computer because there was too much—photos, animations, video, etc.”

“My biggest concern is that high standards are maintained and I think that might require a strong structure and an editor. I don’t think you want to prevent someone from being able to present different kinds of projects but rather find a structure that allows for flexibility and provides a format so that people can navigate through projects easily and get what they need from it.”

“Would be especially invaluable to have pictures of exhibitions that no longer exist such as the long lost Evoluon (60’s Philips exhibit in the Netherlands, very much like the Explo), the Revealing Bodies exhibition, Freud Conflict and Culture exhibition, etc.”

“Getting a nice cross-section of submissions seems like it might be a challenge. I’d predict you’ll get healthy submissions from those few out there who have the time and who like spending time fiddling on their office computers, and then a bunch of submissions from the contractors who have something to sell. What kind of incentive could encourage others to submit? Maybe a Grand Opening that’s difficult to ignore? Can ASTC ‘seed’ the site, so there’s already something there and thus increase the incentive to contribute?”

“Adult-oriented exhibits”

“Has to be international”

“Share simple math exhibit ideas that are fun and easy to build.”

“Will information on training and interpretation of these exhibits be included, or is this strictly for exhibit content?”

“Garbage-in, garbage-out—someone has to monitor the site.”

Ease of use

“Make it available for free and easy to use. Have categories making it easy to search (topic, size, price, target audience, other categories).”

“Keep it simple!”

“Should be easy to submit, with very clear, pre-established format so contributors don’t have to think about it.”

“Don’t be overly ambitious. I like that people type into a database of some sort.”

“Each submission needs to be keyed to words so that search is easy and useful.”

Connections to other information sources

“Place to submit information/how to participate, connection to ASTC listserve, connection to NAME or other organization that focuses on exhibit design.”

“Dave Taylor’s website (if it’s still up) and the Exploratorium Exhibits Services site are the closest thing to a comprehensive listing of exhibits that I’ve seen—and are always the first sites I visit when I’m researching exhibit ideas.”

“Able to “opt out” of emailed newsletters or communication but also option to “opt in” for different types of communications (such as conferences, traveling exhibition announcements, online courses, announcements of new exhibits and grant awards etc)”

“Directory of contact info of science experts who are willing to advise and work with science centers and museums, searchable by field of expertise.”

“Short cuts to content relating to current events.”

What else would encourage use?

“A sense of buy-in by colleagues.”

III. Exhibit practitioners are also looking for....

ISEN-ASTC-L subscribers (based on analysis of 500 exhibits-related postings, January-December 2004, examples below) were looking for information about...

Content

“I am looking for examples of energy exhibitions, particularly those that include information on: 1) basics of energy; conservation/consequences of energy use; and 3) history of human use.”

“As a small science museum with large grounds, we are exploring outdoor exhibit ideas that would incorporate community involvement in a science, art and environmental education exhibit (perhaps including biodynamic gardening, permaculture, native plantings, etc). We have a great deal of community interest, and perhaps more ideas than we can incorporate! I am interested if there are similar projects that currently exist. ... I am looking for brief descriptions, images, maintenance issues, etc.”

“Does your museum have an interactive exhibit on social and genetic factors in health that would be appropriate for a small museum or has components that could be adapted for a small museum?”

Interpretive strategies

“I am seeking advice about interactives to include in an introductory level astronomy exhibit....I am seeking animations and activities that make abstract concepts less mind-boggling for visitors. Specifically, I would like to include interactive experiences to explain concepts such as the Big Bang, galaxy collisions, and the life cycle of stars.”

Access issues

“Is anyone using a safe and durable adjustable table that a visitor in a wheelchair might be able to adjust with EASE?”

Budget/management

“Is there a current average/estimate/guess as the per square foot cost of developing, creating, building, and installing exhibits in a new exhibit hall?”

Interviewees also mentioned using *Are We There Yet?* to find out about..

- budgets, timelines

- time needed to develop exhibitions

- ideas for developing a storyline

- “strategic impact” references—how exhibitions referenced their “big idea”

- what people went through in planning process

..and as a source of inspiration...

- to browse and to lend to others.

- with clients, “to get people to think outside the box.”

- Use “weed seed” cards all the time.

And one interviewee said “I like the eclectic spirit, lots of different voices, styles, perspectives; questioning conventional wisdom.”

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