

Exhibition Designer and Project Manager: The Challenge of a Happy Marriage

By Mrs. Linda King *Exhibit Designer at the National Air & Space museum of Smithsonian Institution.*

Two of the most challenging components of the exhibition process are exhibition design and project managing. Designing an exhibition is to convey two dimensional content into a three dimensional world in an exciting and visual way. Project management is to plan and track the entire design process from start to finish.

Take both of these jobs and magnify it three fold and born is an exhibit designer who also manages their own projects, a happy marriage? A blissful marriage of both is a result of both of these (jobs) working simultaneously at several stages prior to the completion and delivery of the final product. To understand the unity of this marriage is to breakdown the process in stages.

These stages can be identified as the Stage 1, beginning (first date), Stage 2, the middle (the engagement) and Stage 3, the end (the marriage).

Stage1, the beginning (first date)

In stage 1 the designer/project manager learns very quickly which hat to wear to which party. The designer hat can be readily identified by the color yellow which is the hat of creativity or the "think outside the box" hat.

When wearing the yellow hat you don't think about limits, rules, or "business as usual." You look for differences and innovation. The project manager is the hat color of grey, the hat of planning, overviews and goals.

When wearing the grey hat, you think of worst case scenarios; the risks and dangers that can be encountered. This is the fact hat. You wear the grey hat when you talk about data, proven facts, measures, etc. This is also the hat you wear to identify the positive side of the problem and what is good about the proposed solution. Sometimes, it's good to force everybody to find and focus on positive things.

Thus initial meetings begin and are comprised of the curator and designer/project manager. The discussions revolve around the content, creative concepts and the overall planning strategy. At this meeting all hats are worn at the drop of a hat (no pun intended, in the early 19th century this phrase was used to signify the beginning of a race or a fight so excuse the analogy).

In this instance we will extract the message to convey the beginning of a project, the race is one! Once this meeting has taken place the schedule is set, the content begins to take shape and the design concepts follow like a river flowing downstream due to gravity. A solid plan no matter where the river is will take the path of least resistance and flow downhill as rapidly and smoothly as possible. To solidify the plan subsequent meetings are executed with various departments/stakeholders to engage early buy-ins. The buy-ins are tied to planned reoccurring meetings throughout the

duration of the exhibition process to exchange dialogue and assign tasks, basically to make sure everyone stays on schedule.

Stage 2, the middle (the engagement)

At this stage the grey hat dominates. It is the stage of an onslaught of meetings with potential contractors, procurement of materials and labor. This stage calls for the ability to be flexibly on a dime, in other words if Plan A starts to go north Plan B must be ready to spring into action. At this point the job requires the ability to smooch and nudge on a consistent basis. At the same time the yellow hat of designer is being waved in the mere distance. This hat is not ready to be worn in the forefront instead it is a subtle reminder that without this hat (concept, final design) the grey hat would not exist. The grey hat determines how much of the design becomes a reality and the hierarchy of the design components (for instance how much bang can you get for your buck). What will you assign the given dollars to in the end to achieve an esthetically pleasing display?

Stage 3, the end (the marriage)

Aha, the final commitment, the happy marriage. In the end, it's the end result that matters (no pun intended), the finished product. The exhibition is installed. Completed on time and under budget, the deed is done and the contract is sealed. So what makes a marriage survive these challenges? It's as simple as the stages described above. The challenges we face in the work place are the same ones we experience in the development of a relationship. We find solutions, improvements, strategic positions and economics to overcome obstacles and understanding. These are the challenges to a happy marriage in planning/designing an exhibition and the tools to solve them.

I have had the recent experience of wearing both hats; designer and project manager for a recently opened exhibition at the National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution. It is titled Alan Bean: Painting Apollo, First Artist on Another World. The project began in April 2008 and opened July 2009. The planning process was fourteen months.

About the Author



Mrs. Linda King is a designer in the Exhibits Department of the Design division at the National Air & Space museum of Smithsonian Institution. She began working at the Smithsonian as an assistant in the Langley IMAX Theater in 1979. Mrs. King's exhibit design career began in 1984 as she was trained under a program called Upward Mobility.

She has completed over thirty architecture, graphic design and other technical & fine art courses. Mrs. King's natural artistic flair has contributed to her accomplishments in designing and managing design projects at the institute from 1991 to the present time. Prior to that – from 1984 to 1991 – Mrs. King designed printed materials such as posters and brochures.