

Designing for Engagement

Five steps to co-create exhibits and programs with your communities

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FIVE STEPS TO CO-CREATE EXHIBITS AND PROGRAMS WITH YOUR COMMUNITIES



Museums are changing how they interact with the communities they serve—adopting practices that are more inclusive and engaging for all.

Increasingly, museums are turning to co-creation as a method to develop exhibits and programs. Co-creation is when a museum forms an equal partnership with one or more stakeholders to design and execute a mutually beneficial project.

By co-creating with a diversity of community partners, museums are facilitating cross-cultural exchange and connecting their collections to issues that resonate with even more people. Cassie Chinn, deputy executive director at the Wing Luke Asian Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience, put it best when she said,

*"our desire is to know communities intimately. What breaks their hearts breaks ours, what fuels their passion fuels ours...**It's as if time spent in our exhibitions is time spent with someone else, person to person.** And well, perhaps through the text panels, photographs, artifacts, documents, and multimedia installations—all of the stuff of exhibitions—in the end, that might be the best way to describe it: getting to know someone, meeting together, and creating something new."*

The shift towards co-creation is an exciting and necessary change for our industry. But, it can still feel overwhelming. Many museum staff members struggle with how to implement these practices and find themselves unwittingly falling back into old habits.



Luci Creative developed these guidelines to help museum practitioners build successful partnerships around programs and exhibits with community organizations.

We encourage you to use these guidelines to create custom approaches to engagement driven by the interests and expertise of people in the communities that your museum serves.

FIVE STEPS TO CO-CREATE EXHIBITS AND PROGRAMS WITH YOUR COMMUNITIES

1. ABANDON

2. PREPARE

3. ENGAGE

4. CO-CREATE

5. EVALUATE



1. ABANDON

Abandon what you think you know about partners and your subject matter. Start asking questions.

It can be helpful to begin to see things from your constituents' perspective by identifying any assumptions, preconceptions, or stereotypes that you or the museum might hold about the issue or groups involved. Consider **reframing what you think you know as questions for research and exploration**. For example, you may have some pre-existing knowledge of the foods that people from a particular culture or community eat and their practices around food. Instead of starting with those assumptions, ask yourself instead “what are the foodways of this culture, and who could help me learn more about them.”

2. PREPARE

Learn to see from others' perspectives.

By searching for answers to the questions you generated, you will soon find yourself looking for people and resources that can expand your perspective. Start by **reading material written by members of the community** to identify the underlying cultural contexts, behaviors, and values of the people and communities involved. Then, consider **reaching out to community leaders** within your network, to grab a coffee, listen, learn, and begin to identify shared goals.



3. ENGAGE

Invest in relationships with community organizations.

Once you have a clearer picture of the opportunities, challenges, and people involved in a community, you may want to identify organizations to partner with in the future based on common goals.

Invest before you make a request. Before you seek a partner, or ask them to do something for your museum, focus on showing your support and interest in their activities. Consider attending a prospective partners' activities in their neighborhood. Perhaps you might offer your time as a volunteer for their events. Become an ally by helping them advocate for common goals in your region. Learn and remember little things, like your contact's birthday, or send them a card to congratulate them for a recent success. In other words, work to develop long term relationships between your organizations that go beyond a single project or issue.

Once you and your potential partner have a strong relationship and have built a level of trust, you will be in an excellent position to co-create a project together. **Craft an invitation to collaborate by framing the opportunity in your partners' terms.** This means answering the simple question, ***"what's in it for them?"*** Be direct about your expectations, as well as what you can offer. Explain to your potential partner what of their resources and capabilities they might need to mobilize in combination with your own, while also explicitly stating what your limitations might be.



4. CO-CREATE

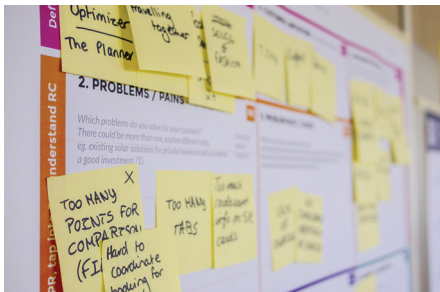
Co-design a process to facilitate successful collaboration and a mutually beneficial product.

Assemble a project team that will share responsibilities, pool your organizations' resources, and create a process for working together. Make sure that the process offers **clear expectations for participants, defines their roles, and creates a meaningful path for decision-making and accountability** that all participants agree upon.

Once you know who will be involved in the project and how they will work together, **define your shared goals**. Lead a discussion about what everyone hopes the project will accomplish for their organizations, who you hope to engage as audiences, and how the project will impact those audiences once the project has ended.

Based on your goals, brainstorm a variety of possible forms the project might take and select an approach that leads to the desired experience and outcomes. Make modifications based on your organizations' shared capacities and budgets.

When developing your project, make sure to design for visitor participation. Ask yourself and your partners, "once the project launches, what are ways that we might ask visitors to take action or add something to the experience?" "What could participants do together that would benefit the larger community?" Use these questions to brainstorm a variety of possible ideas and develop the ones that have the greatest potential.



5. EVALUATE

Build evaluation into your design from the start.

Gather feedback from your collaborators while you're planning the project. Once the project has launched, check in to see how your partners and visitors are responding to it.

Document **what you did to make the project happen**. You may not realize it in the middle of the process, but by the end, you will have pulled together a lot of resources. Take a moment to capture and list what you and your partners put into the project so that you can communicate your efforts to them, including funders and future supporters.

You will likely also want to plan ahead for measuring both outputs (what you made and did together), as well as outcomes (what benefits the community gained because of your partnership). If the project was successful, then it is likely that it changed attitudes or behaviors among audiences. Work with your partners **to identify what may have changed in your communities as a result of your collective efforts**.



ONE LAST THOUGHT...

Over time, your organization's ways of working may change based on the evolution of your long-term partnerships and community-centered programming. Each new partnership and project is an opportunity to determine what is next for your museum.

But, don't lose hope if your organization doesn't change overnight. Change takes time. **Creating a more participatory, diverse, accessible, inclusive, and equitable museum starts with small actions that build relationships and trust.**

By adopting the methods and practices offered here, you will inspire actions that attract more audiences to participate in your museum's experiences. The more you create new levels of collaboration and engagement, the more your partners will see themselves reflected in your museum. When this happens, you will find that your work becomes more dynamic and interesting, and more relevant to the communities you serve. ●

Get in touch with us.
We'd love to work with you!

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