

N'Sync:

Aligning Expectations During
an Exhibition Design Project

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ALIGNING EXPECTATIONS DURING AN EXHIBITION DESIGN PROJECT

According to Google, pop star Justin Bieber is attributed with the quote, “Two people can look at the same thing and see it differently.” It seems more like something Heraclitus or another philosopher might’ve said.

Stephen Covey wrote in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, “Two people can see the same thing, disagree, and yet both be right.” The sentiment is the same: our brains are all wired a bit differently from one another, and we each view and hear things through our own perspective.

There’s often a bit of talk at the beginning of an exhibition design project about setting, aligning, and managing expectations. Whether a museum has an in-house design team or they’re working with an out-of-house firm, we seem to recognize that when a group of people comes to the table to begin the creative process, each person has his or her own presuppositions about what the exhibition will look like, cost, and convey; and what the process will entail.

Getting everyone on the same page makes for a better and more enjoyable process. Here are five strategies for aligning the expectations of your exhibition planning team.





No. 1 | From Day One...

The project kickoff meeting is the perfect point to make sure that everyone is heading towards the same destination.... and using the same map! Instead of jumping into creative brainstorming, begin every kickoff meeting with a review of the work process and products. Go through the project schedule to confirm milestone dates, making sure they're realistic and that key players can commit to them.

When discussing design phases and deliverables, use examples to clarify what the design team will be producing. Show, don't tell, because each person will have a different picture in their mind when hearing terms like "schematic design," "graphics matrix," and "content outline." (see Speaking the Same Language below for more thoughts on this).

No. 2 | Honesty is the Best Policy

It's impossible for the exhibition design process to go smoothly if we're all kidding each other. This is a two-way street. For example, the design team, whether in-house or a hired firm, owes it to their museum colleagues/clients to be frank if the project expectations and brainstorming ideas outweigh the project budget, or if the completion schedule requested by museum leadership is unrealistic. Likewise, if during the creative process a designer is recommending solutions or technologies beyond the cost-comfort level and expectations of those fronting the funds, then someone needs to speak up and put on the brakes.

Exhibition project teams must also set up reasonable expectations as to what may go wrong. No project is without speedbumps, and it's worth acknowledging that mistakes are a normal part of the design process. A drawing may have a dimensional error, or a graphic panel containing a typo might be installed. It happens.



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No. 3 | A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words

It's beneficial to begin the design process with a benchmarking exercise, turning to the field at large to acknowledge trends, successes, and shortcomings. This often includes research into other exhibitions similar to that being developed to see what other museums are doing, to get inspired, and to learn what has worked and what hasn't.

Whether it's done through online image research or by taking trips to other institutions, looking at other exhibitions as a group, including the design team and other stakeholders, can help to build a shared vocabulary and clearly illustrate preferred and described exhibit techniques and aesthetics. It can also serve to highlight projects that were developed from a similar budget as the one your team is working on, to be able to point to things like, "We can afford this quality and type of materials and this density of AV/media experiences."

No. 4 | Speak the Same Language

In the same way that each person will come to the design process with a different mental picture of the exhibition, so too will they come with their own language. Each department in a museum (i.e. development, education, facilities, etc.) has its own lexicon. And exhibit designers, often coming from the worlds of architecture, graphics, theater, or industrial design, have their own glossary of strange terms and acronyms.

To align expectations, the full project team must all be speaking the same language. Words such as “content,” “rendering,” “coordination,” and “images” will mean ten different things to ten different people. Eschew vague terms and periodically, without patronizing, encourage team members to speak up if they don’t understand something. When possible, use visual aids to illustrate terms: “This is the style of ‘rendering’ that we’ll be delivering at the end of this phase.”

No. 5 | To Be Involved, or Not to Be

Some members of the museum’s project team go into the exhibition development process expecting to be involved every step of the way, while others only expect to be consulted at times, or simply to review certain deliverables. But since no one can read minds, different roles and their anticipated involvement should be discussed and defined early. To help clarify this expectation, the project group or manager might want to establish whether the project will follow an “agile” process, where it goes through quick iterative steps that are revisited frequently, or a more traditional “waterfall” approach, with clearly defined phases that are reviewed and approved at major formal milestones.

If you’ve ever done a Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) personality test with a bunch of co-workers, or something like a DiSC profile assessment, then you know how differently we each see the world and how individually we each react to ideas and events. It’s precisely this collection of unique perspectives and behaviors that can make exhibition projects rich and engaging. But it’s also the reason some projects don’t seem to go according to plan – or at least what we each believe the plan to be – and why aligning expectations, and managing them throughout the process, is so important to a successful outcome. museum design project. ●



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We'd love to work with you!

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