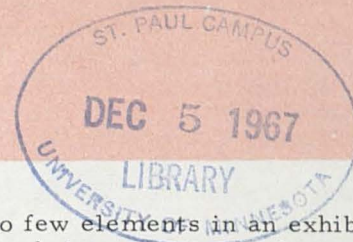




J. T. [unclear] 2

Exhibits—Do They Help Us Communicate Efficiently?

Gerald R. McKay



As communication costs increase, various methods of reaching audiences are being scrutinized both for cost and effectiveness. Let's consider the relative efficiency of communicating through exhibits.

An exhibit's impact is dependent on the skills, attitudes, and knowledge of the designer. Usually, you choose to build an exhibit because it will convey your message more effectively than will other communications devices.

Audience studies indicate that significantly large numbers of people do pass through exhibit areas and stop to view exhibits.

KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE AUDIENCE

Before a decision is made to build an exhibit, certain basic factors should be considered. You need some knowledge of the audience for which your message is intended.

1. What are the specific needs of the audience?
2. What results can you expect from the exhibit?
3. What problems will you have presenting your message through an exhibit?

People won't spend a great deal of time viewing an exhibit, but it is clear that all ages and both sexes can be drawn to an effective exhibit.

An exhibit may cost anywhere from a few cents to hundreds of dollars. In determining the ultimate cost of an exhibit, you should consider transportation and maintenance costs, and how often the exhibit can be used before it's outdated or worn out.

U.S. Department of Agriculture research suggests that the cost of reaching a viewer through an exhibit can be as little as the cost of reaching a reader through printed publications. Many exhibits, however, do not pay their way and end up as expensive fiascoes for the sponsor.

DETERMINING EFFECTIVENESS

Eastman Kodak Company researchers have found that appropriate size, number and position of elements, and brightness and color contrast are vital in attracting people to exhibits.

Too few elements in an exhibit can defeat its purpose, but unnecessary elements dilute the message. Consider message complexity and the audience's comprehension level when designing exhibits.

Also consider the following factors in designing your exhibit:

- . Distance of viewers from exhibit
- . Average viewing time
- . Materials to be used
- . Lighting conditions
- . Visual acuity of viewers

Viewing time is important. For example, persons driving past a highway billboard at 60 miles an hour will probably not read over 9 words, according to research by the Minnesota Outdoor Advertising Association. On the other hand, an exhibit set up near a cafeteria line where people may wait 5 or 10 minutes could contain several hundred words and all would be read. Most exhibits, of course, fall somewhere between these two extremes. The more words in a message the fewer words comprehended. People are able to perceive one-half more words when 7 are shown than when 10 words are shown in the same time period.

The audience's social-cultural background also affects interpretation of your message. An exhibit built for an audience of college graduates could have considerably more depth and be at a much higher technical level than one intended to attract the general public or a group of grade school students.

At the Minnesota State Fair, motion, flashing light, color, and overall illumination were evaluated as attention-getters in exhibits. The only factor that showed any significant superiority in attracting people was overall good light. Apparently the more light on the exhibit, the more people it will attract.

Since people read from left to right, the layout, as a rule, should start at the left and proceed to the right. This is true not only for each individual exhibit but for the total layout of exhibits in a particular building or location.

To attract people to an exhibit, know what

interests and motivates individuals in your audience. People want to excel, construct, and imitate. They also seek pleasure, recognition, friends, and security. Plan your exhibit to appeal to these motivations.

Studies also show that accuracy influences an exhibit's effectiveness. People will accept an exhibit's accuracy if it is identified with a recognized institution, such as a university.

Color contrast in an exhibit helps determine its attractiveness. You should select a pleasing color scheme appropriate to your subject. Dark rich colors are generally appropriate for industry, bright feminine colors for most homemaking subjects, and yellows, greens, and browns for most agricultural subjects. Colors such as yellow, blue, and green are attention-getting and stimulating. Soft colors are good for backgrounds and large areas; bright, intense color combinations clash and shouldn't be used. A combination of red and green of equal intensity, for example, is not good. Green and white, black and yellow, and blue and white are pleasing combinations.

Lettering style also contributes to readability and increases effectiveness. The same style used throughout causes monotony and will not encourage people to read your message. Variety through a combination of upper- and lower-case letters and different sizes or colors will increase readability and increase an exhibit's effectiveness.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATORS

At some time you'll probably plan an exhibit.

It may be a store window display promoting a community action program, a 4-H booth at the county fair, or a table display in your office. Whatever the occasion and whatever your motivation, it's easy to become lost in a maze of blueprint charts and how-to-do-it information. The wise exhibitor will wait to discuss the "how" of building his exhibit until he has settled the more basic question of "why" he wants an exhibit. He must decide what he wants to say, and whether or not an exhibit will effectively convey his message.

An exhibit is an attention-getter. It can have dramatic impact through color and pictures and can be a timesaver for the audience you want to reach.

There are, nevertheless, good reasons for not building an exhibit. Usually they are initially expensive and time-consuming. The cost per person viewing the exhibit may be high. You may not have sufficient time to construct an exhibit, the skills needed to build an effective exhibit may not be available, or your audience may not be large enough to justify an exhibit.

If your staff is undermanned and overworked and you can't count on volunteers, or if your budget is down to its last \$22, perhaps you'd better consider using other communications devices.

But build an exhibit if you can convey your message dramatically with a minimum of words, if you can display your exhibit in a well-traveled area, and if you can employ skilled and imaginative people to design the exhibit.

* * *