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Consulting = Responsibility + Collaboration

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Introduction

In my view, consultation should be a balance between responsibility and collaboration, listening and making recommendations. These illustrative examples are drawn from my experience as an exhibit planning consultant to museums.

Responsibility

As a consultant, my primary *responsibility* is to the client: the organization that hired me and is paying me. The client's goals and wishes are the driving force behind any consulting project, and it is the consultant's responsibility to listen to and thoroughly understand those viewpoints. But there are also considerations beyond the scope of work as defined by the client. A consultant has an overriding responsibility to what might be called the common good.

As an independent consultant, I can choose whether or not to work with a client. For example, suppose a museum approaches me to consult with them on an exhibit project about Native people. Then suppose it becomes clear that museum staff have no intention of involving Native people in the planning process in a meaningful way. I would first make every effort to change their minds. If I failed, I

would decline to be part of their project.

Consultants also have responsibilities in the areas of finances and feasibility. Through a facilitated process, I help the client team express and clarify their hopes and dreams for a project. During this "blue-sky" brainstorming period, all kinds of innovative ideas can emerge. Openness, encouragement, and active listening are essential during the startup meeting.

However, based on past experience with creation of new or expanded museum facilities, I might judge certain of the client's assumptions to be unrealistic. In that case, it's my responsibility to recommend affordable alternatives. Using well-known, successful museums as models, I might endeavor to persuade the client team that they can fulfill their interpretive goals in a small-scale facility, with a minimum of high-tech components.

Collaboration

Collaboration with the exhibit planning team begins with an in-depth startup meeting that's a kind of "brain drain." I act as facilitator, motivating and encouraging team members to brainstorm exhibit content, beginning with potential take-home messages. These are the big ideas that visitors should retain and remember after their visit to the museum. Most people only remember two or three take-home messages at the most. It's important to determine which big ideas we want visitors to take home, because the entire exhibit experience should flow from those ideas. And if we don't choose take home messages, they will choose us!

Exhibits without clear and conscious take-home messages run the risk of being confusing and frustrating to visitors. People naturally want to make sense of the exhibit, and if they have to, they will make up their *own* take home messages. Some visitors might conclude, "History is boring," or "A five-year-old could make better art than this."

At the startup meeting, the planning team also brainstorms key concepts, important facts, objects and images that *must* be displayed, misconceptions and stereotypes to be corrected, questions most frequently asked by visitors, etc.

While working with the planning team, I also arrange to meet informally with elders, local historians, and other trusted advisors. I ask a few questions, they share their knowledge and wisdom, and I write as fast as possible to transcribe their words verbatim. Often these notes translate directly into exhibit text.

Equally important is to gain understanding of the values, traditions, historical events, issues, etc. that are foremost for this community. The more people I am able to meet with and listen to, the more chances I will have to learn what people think is most important. Some of these ideas will become the organizing concepts of the exhibit.

I am indebted to my colleague Craig Kerger at Formations (http://www.formationsinc.com/) for the notion of "Galleries of Thought" within the exhibit. A well-designed exhibit is put together in a way that is recognizable to the people it's about. They think, "This is about us." And the well-designed exhibit also makes sense to outside visitors, who begin to get a picture of what is unique and special about a particular community.

Consultation

Consultation means that I listen to you, the clients, and come up with a recommended approach based on what I have heard. Clients have a story to tell; they understand their institution and their region.What consultants bring to the project is our expertise—in exhibit planning and design, or architecture, audiovisual scripting and production, etc.

The client has the ultimate say about what's in and what's out. This should not be a dictatorial process. The most difficult jobs are those where an in-group or a single person passes judgment on everything—where there is no true planning team. This setup makes a consultant feel like a gladiator, living and dying by the emperor's thumbs up or thumbs down.

At key project milestones, make sure that everyone with authority and influence is present to weigh in on draft documents, concept design, and final design. The point person (usually the director) may have to make a few executive decisions, but community-based consensus is the goal.

There are often very interesting stories that the client team is reluctant to share in public. Remember: the museum is the front porch of the community, and few communities want to show the world their dirty laundry. The planning committee may decide that certain issues are too divisive to be included in the exhibit. Subjects that are difficult and painful for a community to address are sometimes more readily dealt with in a changing exhibit, film series, or forum than in a major "permanent" installation.

As a consultant, I never monkey with the facts. However, in my experience, some facts may be unclear, unknown, or in dispute. I ask the client to include multiple

perspectives on issues. Generally, if a person feels that his or her viewpoint is represented, that's enough. Most people don't object to having other viewpoints represented as well.

Although the consultant may advocate for inclusion of a topic and/or multiple viewpoints, (s)he is not the decision-maker. However, the consultant can insist that all concerned parties be represented in making these decisions. If this doesn't happen, the consultant may then consider whether to break off the consulting relationship on ethical grounds.

Recommended Guidelines for Museum/Exhibit Development

Here are some guidelines to help ensure that your exhibit and museum development process will go smoothly:

- Recruit a planning committee of dedicated people who are in it for the long haul. Planning, design, and construction can take as long as two or three years, depending on the scope of the project. Committee turnover, missed meetings, blown deadlines, etc. are bad for the project and bad for morale. Aim to recruit a committee of people who care.

- Use a formal process to screen potential consultants. Often, a request for qualifications (RFQ) can help you narrow the field, so that you only request proposals (RFP) from qualified firms. If you are unfamiliar with this process, ask colleagues at established museums to share examples of RFQs and RFPs with you.

- If appropriate, use independent consultants to help you with early visioning. If major fundraising is still in your future, consider hiring a design firm or an independent consultant to create an interpretive master plan. This can be a useful fundraising tool.

- Hire the architect and the exhibit design firm at the same time. The building design should match the scope and nature of the exhibits, and vice-versa.

- It is almost always most cost-effective to have exhibits designed and built by the same firm.

- Your consultants will provide you with a series of drafts of exhibit plans and concept designs for exhibits and the building. As the client, your responsibility is to review each draft completely and thoroughly, in timely

fashion. Each time you sign off on a milestone document, be aware that subsequent changes become more difficult to make, and therefore more costly.

- Build changeability and flexibility into your exhibit design. It's important to be able to keep your exhibit up to date. Display cases should be secure, but accessible to staff so you can rotate objects and keep them clean. With computer graphics, it's now relatively easy and inexpensive to redo entire panels in-house.

- Avoid trendy and fashionable designs and graphic looks that will quickly go out of date. And don't use brand-new technology. The first generation of any innovative technology can be expensive and full of bugs. Use proven technology that can stand up to heavy use by museum visitors.

- Here's the most important take-home message about working with consultants on an exhibit or building project: *this project will need your full attention*. Don't think of it as a sideline, but as a second part-time job that will sometimes be full-time.

With a background as a high school teacher and a Ph.D. in Education, Alice Parman began her museum career as educator and administrator at Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History. After a 15-year career as a museum educator and director, since 1989 she has worked as an interpretive planner and organizational consultant for a variety of nonprofit clients. More information at http://www.aparman.com.

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